



JANUARY 2016 NEWSLETTER

Alcohol Abuse Adds to the Cost of Health Care

By Pamela S. Erickson

This summer I got a first-hand look at how alcohol abuse contributes to the rising cost of health care. It was the 4th of July and a family member needed hospitalization (not alcohol related). I rode in the ambulance and listened to the driver talk about a typical 4th of July day. He said most trips to the ER are alcohol related. People drink too much, get in fights, trip and fall, or need care due to extreme intoxication.



Sure enough when we got to the Emergency Room, the place was full of people in red, white and blue t-shirts, hats and shorts talking loudly about their drinking and what injuries occurred.

My family member was okay and suffered no lasting effects except for the bill. Now that was painful!

It turns out health care costs are likely to continue rising. According to the Health Care Cost Institute, "Health care costs have increased three times faster than wages over

the past decade, putting a strain on government resources, and employer and family budgets." They estimate that if costs are not contained, US health spending could nearly double by the end of the decade.

Excessive alcohol use cost \$249 billion in 2010—or \$2.05 per drink--according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). And, while the nation has been focused on opioid and prescription drug deaths, there has been a 37% increase in alcohol-induced deaths per 100,000 since 2002. More than 30,700 Americans died from alcohol-induced causes, including alcohol poisoning and cirrhosis. These figures do not include drunk driving deaths. In fact, CDC estimates that over 80,000 people die each year due to alcohol.

The United States needs a more serious effort to reduce the cost of excessive drinking including the health care costs. While we know a lot about how to reduce problems, we seem to be apathetic about the total costs of alcohol abuse. Our legislatures seem more focused on deregulating alcohol to create short term job possibilities and tax revenue than to prevent long term problems. Instead, the nation should focus on the following:

1. **Strengthen alcohol regulation.** Follow the advice of alcohol researcher Dr. Timothy Naimi who said, "Most states could be doing a lot better to address a leading cause of preventable deaths." He led a team of researchers that ranked states based on the strength of

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Contact Pam Erickson at pam@pamaction.com

their alcohol policies. The research showed that states with stronger alcohol policies had lower rates of binge drinking and liver cirrhosis.

2. **Reduce underage drinking until it is no longer a problem.** We have successfully reduced underage drinking, but it is still too high and greater funding and effort is needed. For example, the CDC reported that in 2013, among high school students, 35% drank some amount of alcohol and 21% binge drank during the past 30 days. Prevention of underage drinking has a large pay-off because those who start drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become addicted. And, of course, we know how alcohol abuse can damage young brains and send youth down a wrong path.
3. **Observe and publicize moderation practices.** The new US Dietary Guidelines recommend that women consume no more than one drink per day and men no more than two. And, all should understand exactly how much alcohol is in any drink.

If we work together on these things, we can help curb alcohol abuse and reduce health care costs.

<http://www.healthcostinstitute.org/2014-health-care-cost-and-utilization-report>

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/health/ct-americans-alcohol-deaths-20151222-story.html>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26477807>

<http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm>

<http://www.livescience.com/41825-binge-drinking-states-alcohol-policies.html>

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