Media Release

OLDER DRINKERS FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS
More effort needed to address risky drinking in the over 50’s

- Health experts warn hazardous drinking in older adults is on the rise
- In New Zealand, up to 40 per cent of older adults are considered hazardous drinkers
- In Victoria, Australia, over-50’s are responsible for the greatest increase in alcohol-related ambulance call outs
- Alcohol use disorder is the leading cause of dementia in people under 65
- Older people should limit their drinking to one standard drink per day with two alcohol free days a week to reduce their risk of alcohol related harms.

(Auckland: Tuesday, 6th November 2018): Older adults are now one of the fastest growing populations of hazardous drinkers, yet health systems are failing to identify them and address their needs until their condition is critical, say health experts gathered at the APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drug Conference today. Latest research on older drinkers is being presented by teams from Massey University, University of Auckland, and the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia.

A review of international survey data, including US National Surveys on Drug Use and Health and the Australian Department of Health National Drug Strategy Household Survey, found growing epidemiological evidence that hazardous drinking is a major public health concern in older populations.

Estimates for the number of older people drinking at risky levels vary widely, from one to just over 20 per cent.

An Australian national community survey found that older adults in fact drink more frequently than younger age groups, albeit at lesser levels. New ambulance attendance data from Victoria found the greatest increase of all ambulance attendances involving alcohol intoxication was in those aged over 50.

In New Zealand, up to 40 per cent of older adults are hazardous drinkers, and the over-50’s drink more frequently and drink more on each occasion than older adults in nine other countries including England, Russia, the United States, Mexico and China.

“Baby boomers worldwide are drinking more than previous generations of older adults and many are drinking at harmful levels,” said Dr Andy Towers of Massey’s School of Health Sciences. “We need to take action now to cut the rate of hazardous drinking in this group, maintain their health and reduce reliance on care,” he said.

Older drinkers present unique challenges, particularly for clinicians and health professionals. Older adults have higher physiological sensitivity to alcohol, more co-morbid health conditions and use of medications that alcohol can interfere with, a higher risk of alcohol-linked mental health issues and a greater likelihood of alcohol-related injuries and death.

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Furthermore, research from Sydney, Australia, established alcohol-related dementia to be the leading cause of young onset dementia (onset of symptoms before age 65), accounting for nearly 20 per cent of cases.

“There is increasing evidence that alcohol is an important, modifiable risk factor for cognitive impairment and should be a target for dementia prevention campaigns. Alcohol is a risk to brain health that we simply cannot ignore any longer,” said lead researcher Dr Adrienne Withall, from the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW Australia.

Troublingly, a recent French data linkage study involving more than 30 million participants put this rate even higher, at 40 per cent.

Despite seeing their GPs frequently, many older drinkers are missed because health professionals often lack specific training on identifying key risks for older drinkers and they use inappropriate screening tools that neglect key health-related risk factors.

“Many older adults and their GPs feel uncomfortable discussing alcohol use, many do not understand what a standard drink is nor what the low-risk guidelines are, and many labour under the assumption - now seriously in question - that a bit of alcohol is good for you,” explains Dr David Newcombe, Director of the Centre for Addiction Research, University of Auckland.

“Older drinkers can be hard to engage,” reiterated Dr Withall, “but doctors need to do better to ensure they establish trust and rapport before asking about alcohol use. Many older people in our research expressed that they would like their doctor to give them more information about alcohol use and services,” she said.

“We need to get the message out there that older people should ideally limit their drinking to one standard drink a day with two alcohol free days per week. Unfortunately, we believe that there is no safe level of drinking for people with dementia,” explained Dr Withall.

“With the number of older people requiring treatment for alcohol use disorders predicted to increase substantially in coming years, it’s critically important that we improve our response now,” said Professor Michael Farrell, Director of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at UNSW, Australia.

“There is a lack of awareness among primary health care, drug and alcohol, aged care and GPs about the extent and impacts of alcohol misuse in older people, as well as possible long-term impacts on cognition. We need to understand the nature and patterns of drinking in this group, the predictors of harmful drinking, identify at-risk groups, and address challenges in the care of older drinkers,” said Professor Farrell.

ABOUT APSAD AUCKLAND 2018

The APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drug Conference is the southern hemisphere’s largest summit on alcohol and other drugs attracting leading researchers, clinicians, policy makers and community representatives from across the region. The Conference is run by the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD), Asia Pacific’s leading multidisciplinary organisation for professionals involved in the alcohol and other drugs field. This year’s conference will showcase high quality and state of the art scientific research into treatment, prevention and policy. It is being held at the Pullman Auckland Hotel, New Zealand 4-7 November.

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- View the APSAD Auckland 2018 Program
- Read more about the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD)
- Contact Petrana Lorenz to arrange an interview or find out about other key topics.

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