

Alcohol addiction - The industry must share the burden

In recent years there has been much hype about our drugs problems, but usually when people talk about drugs, they are not talking about the most prevalent and most abused drug in the country – alcohol. Irish people spend more on alcohol annually than any other people.

That is not a problem in itself, but there are outrageous problems associated with it. It is estimated there are 250,000 alcoholics in this country, and the problems associated with alcohol abuse are costing the country an estimated €960 million. Alcohol-related deaths have doubled in the past 10 years. Liver disease is up by 147%, while admissions to psychiatric hospitals due to alcohol are up at a time when available beds have been decreasing. Many of those problems are now being treated in general hospitals, or in the community.

Those are just the apparent consequences. There is also the untold misery being inflicted on the families who have to watch helplessly as loved ones destroy themselves through alcoholism.

Dr Conor Farren, a consultant psychiatrist at St Patrick's University Hospital has called for definite steps to tackle the alcohol problem. He advocates, for instance, that there should be a health warning attached to all alcohol products similar to those on tobacco products. All beers should carry a warning that it is potentially a lethal addictive drug, and that alcohol can cause liver cirrhosis as well as birth defects if taken by women during pregnancy.

Every advertisement should have a similar warning. For too long the drinks industry was allowed to glamorise alcohol without regard to the consequences, in much the same way as the tobacco industry glamorised cigarettes. The drinks industry raked in the profits while society has been left to reap the consequences.

But, of course, society is not facing up to those consequences properly. The public service has notoriously few treatment facilities for alcoholism. Vision for Change, the report of the Department of Health on the future of psychiatric services in Ireland, excluded any consideration of treating alcoholism.

This calculated indifference amounted to bureaucratic blindness. The department has demonstrated no more vision in this regard than the ostrich with its head buried in the sand.

The drinks industry should be held responsible for the consequence of its reckless promotion of alcohol over the years, in much the same way as religious orders have had to take responsibility for the institutional child abuse. It is grossly unfair that society should be expected to endure all the costs of the consequences.

Even if the profits cannot be shared, the industry should share the costs of the consequences.