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PAYING THE PRICE: NORTH EAST URGENT CARE SERVICES - A SUMMARY

This summary report, produced by Balance, the North East Alcohol Office, details the impact of alcohol misuse on our region's NHS emergency departments (EDs) and urgent care services.

It is well documented that the North East has a problem with alcohol. The latest figures from Balance estimate that alcohol costs the NHS £2.7 billion annually, with the North East figure totalling £242m, equating to £93 per person in the region. (Balance Cost Profiles 2014-2015)

NHS staff in our region's emergency and urgent care departments are dealing with the impact of alcohol misuse on a daily basis, with many becoming 'desensitised' to the problem.

Balance visited hospitals and urgent care services across the North East, conducting meetings with staff at all levels of the NHS to assess the impact of alcohol misuse on their working lives.

'The problem is getting worse'

Darlington Memorial Hospital

According to a senior ED consultant at Darlington Memorial Hospital, alcohol places a heavy and evolving burden on NHS resources. The ED at Darlington Memorial Hospital was built to accommodate between 95-100 patients per day. However, statistics for 2015 show that there were on average 165 cases a day, many of them alcohol related.

An ED consultant described the substantial drain on NHS resources posed by typical alcohol-related incidents. "The majority of cases turn up in an ambulance and more often than not, we need to do head scans, take X-rays and anesthetize the patient. In terms of staff, this can require a couple of nurses, a healthcare assistant, a junior doctor, a senior doctor, an anaesthetist and a radiographer to operate the CT scanner. If the patient has a severe head injury, they're likely to spend at least one day in intensive care, with a nurse alongside them 24:7, then potentially a few days on the ward – all of which costs the service a huge amount of time, money and resources.

"Incidents are not only due to the typical laddish culture anymore. We often have people in their 60s and 70s coming in with alcohol problems and an increasing number of women too.

"The problem is getting worse; I think it is linked to longer licensing hours and we now see a spread of patients throughout the day. Cheap alcohol is a major factor – cider,

KEY FINDINGS

- * The cost of alcohol-related ED attendances at one of the region's largest hospitals can be conservatively estimated at £1m per annum.
- * The latest figures from Balance estimate that alcohol costs the NHS £2.7bn annually, with the North East figure totalling £242m, equating to £93 per person in the region. (Balance Cost Profiles 2014-2015).
- * ED and urgent care staff have become "immersed in the effects of alcohol" and "desensitised to its impact".
- * In the region's larger EDs, it is common to treat 30-40 patients a day who have been drinking, diverting resources from other cases.
- * The problem is so great that some of the region's larger EDs employ a permanent security presence to help maintain order.
- * Young women in their 20s and 30s and older people are increasingly arriving in EDs with alcohol-related issues.
- * Alcohol-related attendances account for up to 72% of cases on Fridays / Saturdays from 2am-3am.

beer and spirits such as whisky and vodka. We're also seeing more women, who often drink wine."

'Permanent security presence'

RVI, Newcastle

The impact of alcohol misuse on urgent care services in Newcastle is very high; with staff noting that the RVI's location adjacent to the city centre makes it an easy calling point for people who have been out in the city's bars.

The Emergency Department at the RVI continues to suffer from an excessive burden of alcohol-related incidents. According to one of the senior ED consultants, the overall workload has increased significantly in recent years, with "incredibly busy" periods during the night and in the early hours - exacerbated by alcohol-related attendances.

The Consultant noted that it was not uncommon over the weekend to have a number of disruptive drunk patients "being rude and in various states of undress", all of which has the potential to be distressing to other patients, particularly elderly or vulnerable groups. It also explains why the Department has invested significantly in a permanent security presence, seven days a week.

'Physical assault and verbal abuse'

Sunderland Royal Hospital

According to a senior ED Consultant at Sunderland Royal Hospital: "We see 10-15 alcohol-related cases on an average day: These generally fall into one of four categories: patients with alcohol-related mental health issues; those who have sustained injuries through 'binge'

drinking; people with chronic alcohol-related conditions, many of whom are presenting at younger ages than ever before; and underage drinkers, mainly girls, who have drunk too much and ended up in vulnerable situations.

"The ED has more staff than ever before, but we are also catering with an unprecedented demand for our services. A few years ago, there used to be a 'down' time in the ED, but now it's routine to work a whole night shift with no break. We're working under massive pressure, occasionally under the threat of physical assault and frequently on the end of verbal abuse from intoxicated patients.

"Nowadays, it is common for patients to present intoxicated, with resulting injuries, at all times of the night and often at 4am or 5am in the morning."

'Enough is enough'

University Hospital of North Tees

A senior nurse stated that she had: "Experienced verbal and physical abuse from patients who were under the influence of alcohol. Drunken patients just aren't bothered if you tell them that their swearing and shouting is a disruption to others around them.

"More than once when I have asked somebody to stop shouting and swearing because there were children present, or they were next to a sick patient and their relatives – drunken patients really can have a really awful impact on the patient experience of others. It is totally unacceptable and hugely upsetting to other patients. Many colleagues are disheartened with the abuse and agree that enough is enough.

CONCLUSION

Alcohol misuse has a huge impact on the region's emergency departments and urgent care services, placing an unsustainable burden on staff and services, day and night. With the NHS already under pressure, it is hugely important to reduce the excessive burden placed on both staff and services by potentially avoidable alcohol-related attendances.

To reduce the burden alcohol places on our frontline services, alcohol should be less affordable, less available and less widely promoted.

The Government needs to support a range of targeted, evidence-based measures such as a minimum unit price, which has been shown to save lives, reduce hospital admissions and lessen the financial burden alcohol places on frontline services.