

Strategies to Address Alcohol Problems, Diyanath Samarasinghe. FORUT (Colombo), 2005, Pp 132, Rs 400

Diyanath Samarasinghe presents a provocative and refreshing set of strategies to address alcohol-related problems at the community, national and global levels.

The book begins with a very useful introduction and a broad overview. The main contents are presented in two parts. Part A includes a comprehensive evidence-based account of why a response is needed and details the range of useful responses.

Part B includes four chapters to describe the strategy and action to adopt at these three levels.

The book is a reflection of the author's career-long involvement in helping individuals, communities and nations to cope with problems related to substance use. It is written in simple but elegant prose and is perhaps one of the best, if not the best, he has written so far.

Forut's Secretary General's note on the background of the book is helpful in linking the present work to a previous book, *Alcohol and Poverty in Sri Lanka*, which he co-authored. Professor Griffith Edwards, Emeritus Professor of Addiction Behaviour at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, provides a delightful and an accurate observation about the author and the book. It is difficult to improve on Professor Edwards' final observation, '...and for the further getting of wisdom, read on.'

The chapter titled, 'Why is a response needed?' outlines the well-documented morbidity and mortality, socio-economic effects and benefits associated with alcohol use. The discussion on economic benefits, pleasure and fun, and health benefits challenges the reader to examine the basis of widespread views and analyses. More recent studies, which refute the much-touted cardio-vascular protective effects of moderate alcohol use, vindicate the author's stand on claimed health benefits.

Part B commences with an overview of strategy possible at the three levels. At each level, the author discusses how ownership, power and required strategy are best dealt with.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 describe in detail the community, national and global strategy, respectively.

In each chapter the author discusses the technical issues followed by recommended practical steps. In the chapter titled, 'Community action', the author claims

can be read alone. This is a justified claim. In getting action started the author recommends communities to go beyond mere protesting. Eight practical interventions are suggested. Of these, reducing the attractiveness of the image of alcohol, reducing unfair privileges attached to alcohol use, improving recognition of the real harm from alcohol use, and preventing the 'alcoholisation' of all social events and activities, the reader is unlikely to read in any other source or publication.

'National responses' begins with a realistic appraisal of the powerful influence of the alcohol trade. The essentials of a national strategy are very clearly described. The section on mobilising influences to match the power of the alcohol trade will be useful for those who want to advocate health policies to reduce alcohol related problems.

The 'Global strategy' chapter is both ambitious and optimistic. The author's proposal that a new agency or a collective be established is both challenging and proactive. He further urges us to think afresh, to reframe the problems and encourages us to challenge several so far unquestioned assumptions. The author acknowledges that the global arena is nebulous. But his advocacy of simple and small steps in a complex arena for action are rational and convincing.

This is a refreshing new view of what needs to be done and what can be done to reduce the well-recognised harm associated with alcohol use. Will the inhabitants of the global village listen? Time will tell.

The conclusion is optimistic and well articulated. The appendix deals briefly, too briefly I think, with guidelines to help those who are dependent users. I think a longer chapter on what can be done at the individual level would have made this otherwise excellent book more complete.

Though references are made to other substance use, I think an attempt should have been made to link strategies to prevent and reduce problems associated with all substance use. Though the general graphic design of the book provides a pleasant read, the not very visible orange or yellow text are a minor irritant.

This is an essential read for all those workers and personnel working at national and community levels if they want to bring about effective interventions to reduce this centuries old problem – well recognised by earlier civilisations but unfortunately not successfully overcome yet.

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