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Consumption of alcohol needs to be regulated urgently to end road carnage

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IT WAS, as the age-old carol reminded us, the season to be jolly. And for most, it was. But for the families of 1 386 South Africans, it wasn't, for they were left mourning loved ones killed in road accidents in the 2014-15 festive season, the latest victims of the carnage on our roads.

Thirty-eight people dying every day between December 1, 2014 and January 5 is absolutely tragic.

What is even more disheartening – as Transport Minister Dipuo Peters pointed out in her presentation of the festive season statistics – is that it is all so pointless.

The statistics show that close on one-third of all the crashes – 31 percent – occurred between 10pm and 6am and that four out of five (80 percent) occurred in residential or built-up areas.

"Surely," Peters pondered, "these are fatalities that could have been avoided, had we celebrated and behaved in the most

responsible way."

The minister said that alcohol was a factor in many of the crashes.

Peters said drunk driving remained a major challenge.

Between December 1 and 23, authorities arrested 904 drivers who were driving under the influence of alcohol and exceeding the speed limit.

She lamented the fact that "despite our robust and laudable efforts to urge our road users not to drink and drive, not to speed and not to drink and walk, road users still remained adamant and recalcitrant in their behaviour".

This recalcitrance is not restricted to motorists and pedestrians.

South Africans on the whole remain largely ignorant of, and resistant to, the negative impact of alcohol use and abuse on their lives, fortunes, communities, health and safety.

A study published in the South African Medical Journal last February, titled "The

Cost of Harmful Alcohol Use", based on research commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry, found that policies on the sale and cost of alcohol were designed to maximise industry profits, taxes and job creation, but did not mitigate the harmful effects of alcohol on society.

The research put the financial cost of harmful alcohol use a year at R39.2 billion and the intangible cost at R245bn.

And the cost to taxpayers did not take into account the immense harm experienced by thousands each day.

Besides the high road death toll to which alcohol is a major contributor, alcohol abuse is also the third largest contributor to death and disability in South Africa, after sexually transmitted infections and interpersonal violence.

In fact, it is the most abused drug among South Africans – contributing 7 percent to the total disease burden, according to the study.

The cost does not end there.

We divert much-needed funds not just to fixing the harm at societal and individual level, but also towards the cost of alcohol consumption at an individual level. In a country that can ill-afford it, researchers have found that up to 13 percent of discretionary disposable income is spent on alcohol.

What is clear, however, as Peters pointed out, is that it cannot be left to South Africans to police themselves, as is advocated by the alcohol industry.

This powerful industry claims that alcohol is not the problem; that it is people's right to choose what and how much they consume.

It claims that drinking alcohol in moderation is healthy and insists that the abuse of alcohol is a problem for only a minority of drinkers who "do not know how to drink responsibly".

Evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Professor Charles Parry, of the Alcohol

Tobacco and Other Drug Research Unit, for the South African Medical Research Council, found that changing the alcohol environment in Africa "suggests the need for restrictive alcohol control policies".

In an address to the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance Regional Forum in Gaborone, Botswana, last month, Parry said an analysis of alcohol-control policies in 46 African countries had found that there was a correlation between consumption and restriction. The more regulation, the less people drink.

Controls included taxation on alcohol, restrictions on sales, minimum purchase age, restrictions on consumption in public venues, breathalyser testing, random testing, drink-driving limits and regulations on advertising, product placement and sales promotion, among other efforts.

"Given the correlation between restrictive alcohol policies and reduced consumption, our study demonstrates need for

stronger alcohol-control policies in Africa," said Parry.

His findings are supported by the most recent festive road casualties.

We should not, in fact, we cannot in good conscience continue to believe that it is the right of South Africans to decide how much alcohol they want to consume. All rights are balanced by responsibility; and alcohol use and abuse is having a massive, mostly negative impact on South Africans and their quality of life.

It is therefore incumbent on the government to act urgently to regulate the consumption of alcohol, such as a total ban on alcohol advertising and implementing safer social spaces around shebeens and other drinking venues to control access to alcohol, and protect the rights of all South Africans.

Should we not, all we can look forward to is more holiday carnage year after year.

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