



National Aboriginal Health Organization



Thinking Drinking: Achieving Cultural Change by 2020 Australian Drug Foundation Melbourne, Australia February 21-23, 2005

The Australian Drug Foundation (ADF), along with a number of key agencies in Australia and New Zealand hosted the conference on alcohol and the culture of drinking. The theme of the conference was *Thinking Drinking: Achieving cultural change by 2020*. Why *Thinking Drinking*? Our communities (world-wide) are thinking of drinking more than ever. Why *achieving cultural change*? Our very “thirsty” drinking culture needs to change. Why *2020*? The target date for a change in our behavior. The conference had 300 attendees, with speakers from Australia, New Zealand, United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Sipporah Enuaraq, Ajungginic Centre Community Liaison, attended on behalf of the National Aboriginal Health Organization.

The conference was a first of its kind to take place in Melbourne, Australia. The purpose of the conference was to exchange ideas and information, share research and to refocus attention on alcohol and understanding of the drinking culture. Also emphasized at the conference was the need to establish new direction for alcohol policy, and to assist in the development of alcohol programs. Also discussed was the need to change the drinking culture, to address the resistance to change and to ensure that alcohol issues get on the public agenda.

During the conference, it was acknowledged that alcohol poses many problems whether it is personal or affecting whole communities. It was acknowledged that a change is needed for the current drinking culture to reduce the enormous burden of alcohol problems. Every participant at the conference acknowledged that we need to take action now to correct the problems. A delegate stated that we have the moral authority to initiate the change in the drinking culture. We cannot eliminate alcohol, but we can initiate the change by re-educating people. One of the suggested approaches that can be applied is the Anti-smoking campaign model.

Changes in the drinking culture will bring forth 3 key questions:

1. How will the alcohol industry react?
2. How will the service industry react?
3. How will the local authorities react?

Therefore, will the changes be viewed as a Threat or an Opportunity? This is a very important question, as alcohol has the potential to affect people in every aspect of their lives. Actions that people make have consequences whether it is positive or negative. “For those babies born in 2005, what will the world be like in 15 years’ time? If nothing else, there is a fair chance they will have experimented with alcohol. If current trends continue, they will possibly be well entrenched in their drinking careers. And the evidence suggests that some will come to serious harm. Yet, in 2020, will we still have a culture that encourages, condones and excuses unsafe alcohol use?” (quote from a presenter). In today’s world, we have come to view alcohol as a normal every day commodity. We use alcohol as a way to celebrate, to console ourselves and to enhance our lives. Somewhere along the way, we have lost sight that alcohol is a drug – a drug that leaves devastating effects on millions of people.

The participation of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO), specifically the Ajunnginiq Centre, at this event was important. Alcohol is problematic in many Inuit/Aboriginal communities. At the conference, it was evident that alcohol misuse is a world-wide problem, and is not prevalent only within the aboriginal groups.