No Eggsperts in the Treatment Basket: NT Chief Fails to Answer Critics

The NT Chief Minister has again revealed his ideological rejection of evidence-based alcohol policy in the NT. Adam Giles’ failure on the ABC’s Lateline last Thursday¹ to nominate a single expert who supports the CLP’s Alcohol Mandatory Treatment (AMT) Bill, particularly the criminalisation of drunkenness, shows an astonishing resistance to evidence.

“He says he is worried about domestic violence and about kids who are hurt and neglected through grog abuse. So is PAAC and so are many others, such as the Congress Aboriginal health service and NPY Women’s Council. They have campaigned on the issue over many years. Tragically, Mr. Giles’ only answer is expensive AMT for a very few, topped off with the criminalisation of drunkenness kicking in on the third breach of a detention order,” said PAAC spokesperson Dr. John Boffa.

“The Chief Minister’s bare-faced claim on national television - that that no-one has had anything to say about how to tackle our appalling record on grog abuse and domestic violence for eleven years - shows just how out of touch he is with major initiatives that have made a difference in the NT.

“He knows, and his Rehabilitation Minister Robyn Lambley admits, that about 90% of people under AMT orders won’t get off the grog as a result. The likely most effective single measure, an alcohol floor price per standard drink at the cost of beer, would cost nothing!

“He stubbornly and irresponsibly ignores the evidence about what will reduce consumption. He refuses to re-introduce a Commonwealth-funded Photo ID system that costs virtually nil to run, and which would help to prevent sales to people who do abscond from rehabilitation or breach Tribunal banning orders. It seems he’d rather they keep breaching orders and face a prison term the third time. Is this a good use of public money compared to other investments, especially early childhood and family intervention programs?

Ordering people to treatment on a trial basis with no criminal consequences may be effective with some addicts, provided there is good follow up and support. But even if we get all of this right, it will still be a very small contribution to addressing problem. It is also wrong to detain people for up to eight days without any charge, as is now proposed, and to criminalise drunkenness by creating offences for absconding.

“In case Adam Giles really believes no-one has any answers, we’d be happy to refer him – again – to credible research on what works: pricing adjustments to cheap liquor, and shorter take-away hours including a day without take-away sales.

“It is very likely that for the first time in six years NT wide alcohol sales have increased since the election of the CLP Government and the removal of the Banned Drinkers’ Register. No wonder some have been calling the CLP the ‘Country Liquor Party’ and that the alcohol industry is so happy.

“It is not too late for the Chief Minister to listen to the evidence and implement what works. This would be the best way for him to act on his concern for women and children,” Dr. Boffa concluded.

Comment: Dr. John Boffa: 0418 812 141. Text if call not answered.

¹ Transcript of Giles’ Lateline interview here: http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2013/s3781510.htm
Additional Background

The Chief Minister appears to be unaware that since 2001 there has been a continuing improvement in the ‘all cause’ mortality rate and life expectancy for Aboriginal people in the NT. In fact, as a result of this major improvement the NT is now the only jurisdiction on track to ‘Close the Gap’ by 2031. There has been a decline of around 30% in the pre-mature death rate which equates to 47 fewer pre-mature deaths per year compared to 1998.

The homicide rate has fallen dramatically, from 16 per 100,000 to 5.4 per 100 000. There is still far too much violence and much of it is preventable, but the Chief Minister needs to be aware of the progress has been made.

The major reason for this health improvement has been the implementation of an evidence-based approach to improving the primary health care and hospital systems. Another key factor, however, has been the implementation of supply reduction measures in relation to both petrol sniffing and excessive consumption of alcohol.

Since 2006 there has been a steady 15% decline in wholesale alcohol sales and per capita consumption across the NT, largely due to the removal from the market of cheap, bulk wine in four- and five-litre casks. In Alice Springs it is clear that, since 2006, increased price has reduced consumption and led to about 120 fewer hospital admissions per annum for Aboriginal women for assault than would have been the case without additional restrictions.²

The Chief Minster refuses to re-introduce a Commonwealth-funded Photo ID and Banned Drinkers’ Register system that costs virtually nil to run, and which would help to prevent sales to people who do abscond from rehabilitation or who breach court or Tribunal banning orders. Without a point-of-sale monitoring system, both the AMT scheme - and the proposed Alcohol Protection Orders (legislation yet to be seen) will be next to useless.

The CLP Government, according to the Commonwealth, is unlikely to be permitted have its AMT Tribunal use income management as a ‘stand-alone’ measure – in the absence of other measures to reduce supply and consumption.

The gains we have made will wind back or stop if Adam Giles persists with unproven policies that will in the main just hide nuisance drunks from public view at huge public expense.