



Alcohol and Ageing

The views of older women and carers

Promoting positive choices about alcohol to enable older women to live healthily and independently as long as possible.

Executive Summary



The Gender Issues Network on Alcohol (GINA) Scotland

GINA came into existence through a growing recognition of the increase in alcohol consumption among women and the associated health and social impacts. It has now grown into a network of individuals and organisations committed to acknowledging and raising awareness of the gender-sensitive issues which people and support services experience when dealing with alcohol. GINA provides information, support and assistance through a range of programmes and activities, to any individual or organisation within the voluntary or public sectors that have an interest in or are involved with people whose lives are affected by alcohol.

GINA is:

- **A Network for sharing knowledge and information on all aspects of gender and alcohol;**
- **A Network for enabling partnership working;**
- **A Network for promoting, sharing and developing good practice;**
- **A Network for action;**
- **A Network for development, research and capacity building.**

Context of the Report

The over 65 population of Scotland will increase considerably in the next 25-30 years - by 2027 the over 50s will make up roughly 55% of the adult population and by 2031 the number of people aged 75+ is projected to increase by 75%. Additionally, drinking surveys have shown that the levels of alcohol consumption within the older population have been rising steadily over the past 20 years. These factors, combined with the lack of alcohol information and guidance for older people, led Alcohol Focus Scotland's Gender Issues Network on Alcohol (GINA) to undertake research into older people and alcohol during 2008/09. The ethos underpinning this research is "Live as healthily and independently for as long as possible - be aware of the impact of alcohol on your health". It was further agreed that the work would give a particular emphasis to older women's relationship with alcohol; however some data was collected from older men during the research. For the purpose of this report older people were defined as those 55 years of age and older in line with current research being conducted and with Scottish Government thinking in this area.

Aims

There were several aims to this research:

- **To examine the alcohol related experiences of older people;**
- **To gather qualitative information from women aged 55+ to gain a better understanding about their relationship with alcohol, including knowledge around unit awareness as well as general attitudes and beliefs;**
- **To gather quantitative information from people (men and women) aged 55+ to gain a better understanding of their relationship with alcohol;**
- **To explore knowledge of the impact alcohol may have on medication effectiveness;**
- **To develop and pilot a training package for Carer Support Workers of older people who may have issues with alcohol.**

Methodology

A mixed method approach was used for the research and was split into 3 main areas:

- **Questionnaires were used to gather quantitative information from both older women and older men;**
- **Focus groups were used to gather qualitative information from older women only;**
- **Training – a pilot training package was developed and tested with Carer Support Workers.**

Alcohol Focus Scotland worked in partnership with organisations that work with older people. These organisations included the Scottish Pensioners Forum and Age Concern Scotland (now Age Concern and Help the Aged in Scotland). To develop training for carers, links were made with the Princess Royal Trust for Carers and Independent Age.

Application of Approach

Questionnaires

Information was gathered in a number of key areas these included brief biographical data; levels and patterns of alcohol consumption and reasons for drinking. Information was also obtained on awareness of service provision and appropriate places to provide information on alcohol targeted at people aged 55 years and above.

Focus Groups

The focus groups provided the opportunity for small group discussion with older women to allow a qualitative picture to be built. Discussions centred on alcohol awareness, including unit awareness and the change in society's attitudes to alcohol in general in their lifetime particularly in relation to women. Other topics of discussion concerned the effectiveness of alcohol information resources; the testing of a sample of current resources available including leaflets and factsheets specifically produced for older people - and "hands on" unit measuring devices.

Finally, the focus groups explored the issues of age sensitive materials and the distribution, placement and provision of these for maximum impact on this population.

Training

Acknowledging that some of our hardest to reach older people may have their main social contact via a carer (paid or unpaid) it was felt to be critical to involve carers in this research. Work was undertaken in partnership with key carer organisations to develop a pilot training course on alcohol awareness for carers of older people. This training was piloted with Carer Support Workers from the Princess Royal Trust for Carers. Useful feedback was obtained around the difficulties faced particularly by unpaid carers such as family members and friends. The main concerns included the time and financial resources needed to access training of this type.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of female respondents drink alcohol, with only 20% reporting that they never drink alcohol. The most popular cohort was ‘special occasions only’, with 22%, and the least common cohort was “every day” with only 6%;
- The majority of women who drink reported drinking at home at 69%, followed by in restaurants at 58%. The least common drinking locations were at social clubs and pubs where only 11% of the women usually drank;
- For those who drink, the most popular choice of drink was wine, with 66% of the women reporting that they drank it. Only 4% of the women reported beer as one of their favourite drinks;
- Seventy-five percent of the women who drink do so with family and friends. Just over a quarter, 26%, of women drink with their partner and 16% said they drink alone;
- The most popular reason for drinking, for those women who drink, was to be sociable (63%). Relaxation too was a popular reason (57%). A further 5% of respondents cited drinking as a means to help them sleep. Other reasons included loneliness (2%), to help forget their problems (1.5%), and a further 1.5% cited bereavement as a factor for their drinking;
- Seventy-five percent of female respondents reported having previously received information about drinking and health. The most common medium for this information was from written literature, such as newspapers, other publications and leaflets, with 82% of these women receiving information this way. The second most common source of information was from their doctor with 18% of the women receiving information from their GP;
- Only 30% of the women report having being asked by their doctor or nurse in the past about their drinking. Much of this was during a pre-operation screening discussion;
- Seventy-five percent of the women who responded to the questionnaire were on prescribed medication, of those women, only 38% reported any discussion about whether their prescription could be affected by drinking alcohol;
- Forty-five percent of the female respondents said they would feel comfortable talking to a doctor about their drinking. The second most popular choice was with a family member or friend (40%) and the third most popular was a nurse (28%);

- **Seventy percent of women said they felt they would know where to get help if they needed help in relation to alcohol misuse;**
- **Seventy-six percent of female respondents reported that they would use local supports for alcohol problems if they thought this was needed;**
- **Seventy-seven percent of the women who responded felt that the over 55 population need to be given more information about alcohol but raised issues as to how, where and when this should be done. Seventy-four percent of women felt that leaflets available at a range of locations would be a good way to give older people information about alcohol. Other popular methods included information to be given from GP's and health professionals (64%) and for information to be included in specific magazines aimed at the 55+ population (50%);**
- **The most popular type of information which women reported they would like was about how alcohol affects the health of those 55+, (56%), while the second most popular choice was information about alcohol and medications (48%), closely followed by information about the recommended number of drinks per day/per week (47%).**
- **Participants within the focus groups reported massive shift in attitudes to alcohol in their lifetime, with alcohol consumption being increasingly acceptable, particularly for women. They highlighted that there was a particular shift from a culture of drinking alcohol on special occasions to much more regular drinking. Furthermore there was complete agreement from all women that pubs and alcoholic drinks have become much more 'woman friendly' over the past number of years.**
- **Overall there was very poor and inaccurate unit awareness amongst participants in focus groups. Some women knew units existed but very few knew what this meant in real terms. Most had heard of units but almost all vastly underestimated what a unit of alcohol was, with many equating a unit as a 'drink' (i.e. a glass of wine, a gin or a sherry).**

Recommendations

It is clear from our work that further research and actions is needed in the area of older people and alcohol. A number of key recommendations came from our work as follows:

1. Development of age based sensible drinking guidelines

Age based sensible drinking guidelines are essential to ensuring a healthier and more independent population of older people. The current guidelines do not take into account the vulnerability to alcohol induced by the ageing process;

2. Development of alcohol information/resources for older people

Older people have provided their thoughts and ideas on the style and types of resources which could have the most impact with the older population which ensure they are accessible and engaging without being condescending;

3. Placement of information in areas identified as being most relevant to older people

Consideration should be given to placement of information in the locations identified in this report;

4. Delivery of alcohol awareness sessions for older people

It is recommended that sessions are delivered at groups and clubs attended by older people based on the feedback received by older women on their experiences of having alcohol awareness information delivered within a discussion group setting. This type of input significantly heightened their understanding of the implications of alcohol consumption in older age;

5. Focus Groups with older men

It is recommended that to give further weight to this research focus groups are organised with older men. These groups should take the same approach and format as the women's groups;

6. Development of an Older People's Strategy by Alcohol Focus Scotland

This research by GINA has been significant in terms of developing understanding about older people and alcohol. It is recommended that Alcohol Focus Scotland in its role of lead national charity on alcohol develops a strategy for work with older people to ensure the key areas of work identified in this report are developed and moved forward;

7. Raise awareness among health professionals on the importance of discussing the possible effects of alcohol and medication.

Any GP health check ups for this group should include a drinking history and awareness of the need to discuss the interaction between alcohol and medication;

8. Work with carers

The report describes the importance of carers in terms of engaging those older people who are most vulnerable in our society. Work on awareness raising training should continue to be developed in this area to ensure we reach those older people;

9. Explore options for further development work and awareness raising training

It is recommended that further work and awareness raising training should be undertaken to increase awareness of issues around older people's consumption of alcohol and in particular identifying older women as a vulnerable group. One area for consideration could include through the brief intervention support mechanisms for Primary Care Trust staff.

The above recommendations are a start point to addressing the significant challenges facing Scotland as its population ages. We have at our disposal facts and figures which allow us to predict relatively accurately the considerable difficulties which face our health and social care services. The challenge is to reach 2031 having improved the health and wellbeing of our older population. Older people in Scotland have the right and should have the opportunity to live as healthily and independently for as long as possible. Making informed and considered decisions about their alcohol consumption is vital to ensuring that future.

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