

Closing of Hotels by Six in the Evening in Australia Substantially Reduced Alcohol Consumption and its Adverse Health Consequences: Conventional Wisdom Upturned

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Abstract

Early (six o'clock) closing of hotels was introduced in 1916 in Australia to curb heavy drinking, lasting between 21-51 years in four Australian states. The aim of this study was to assess the impact of early closing on alcohol consumption, and its consequences. Early closing had a substantial downward effect on alcohol consumption across 1901-2006. It had a substantial and beneficial effect on its consequences including liver disease mortality.

Keywords: Alcoholic intoxication; Policy; Liver diseases; Homicide; Suicide

About the study

In those days, most drinking was in hotels, almost solely by men, with very little drinking occurring at home by either men or women. Early closing has not been favorably remembered in Australia in recent years-workers were seen going into hotels after work for an hour of speed-drinking, before emptying out on the streets in the evening in an inebriated state [1-3].

The aim of this study is to assess the impact of early closing on alcohol consumption, liver disease mortality rates, drunkenness and various forms of injury. Time series analysis was undertaken, relevant data being derived from annual publications of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Early closing had a substantial downward effect on alcohol consumption across 1901-2006. It had a substantial and beneficial effect on liver disease mortality. Drunkenness rates declined pre-World War II though they increased post-war. Rates for homicide decreased substantially, and closed substantially for suicide and female homicide.

Early closing impacts were more beneficial pre-World War II than post-World War II. Things had changed as a result of mass migration and growing affluence. Much drinking had now moved into the home and a 'restaurant culture' grew. While universal closing at six in the evening is no longer feasible or desirable, accessibility of alcohol is still part of the policy discussion in Australia. Confirming this, an international systematic review of the impact of policies regulating alcohol trading hours and days on specific alcohol-related harms has concluded that relevant policies have had a potential direct positive effect in the prevention on these [4,5].

Nowadays alcohol is much more available. To illustrate this, rideshare services can now deliver large number of bottles of spirits to

people's homes in the evenings, within half an hour of receiving a telephone/internet order. Notwithstanding this, alcohol consumption has declined in the new century [6]. Reasons for this reduction in consumption are not clear and require further research. Growing risk-takingness fuelled by the rise of the internet amongst young is likely to be important [7]. There are thus 'swings and roundabouts' over time in the availability of alcohol that policy makers enact for the public.

While universal closing at six in the evening is no longer feasible or desirable, opening hours and days remain part of the policy discussion and mix in various circumstances in Australia. These include, for example, restrictions in the hours of late night trading, such as the 'battle' over late closing in Sydney's Kings Cross and downtown Sydney area [8].

In the Northern Territory of Australia, it is also clear that, while non-indigenous Australians are willing to apply restrictions which will be primarily applied to indigenous Australians, they will also apply some such restrictions to themselves [9]. In some northern territory towns, Mondays and Tuesdays have been designated as takeaway-alcohol-free days, with daily opening hours otherwise restricted to between 3 pm to 7 pm. These restrictions on purchases at liquor stores also apply in many parts of Western Australia.

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