

Tundra Times



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On Kach Neck: Following and Reporting

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Guest editorial

Alcohol is killing us

by Valerie Davidson

Miss National Congress of American Indians

First of all, I would like to thank Janie Leask, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, for giving me the chance to comment on this subject in her place. This forum provides an opportunity to remind my relatives, my friends and all of my neighbors across Alaska that alcohol use is dangerous because it is drug abuse.

Recently, there have been two incidents of toxic poisoning by alcohol substitutes that resulted in the deaths of young Alaskans. Last year, in the village of Wainwright, two adults and two juveniles died, and three other individuals, including one teenager, suffered the effects of toxic poisoning.

In a more recent incident in April, 12 Quinhagak teenagers were poisoned, one of whom died, after drinking punch that was spiked with an alcohol substitute.

Publicity resulting from these incidents has compelled me to assess the problem of alcohol abuse in Alaska. We all see the toll that alcohol takes on society. We are all exposed to the death, the violence, the accidents, the negligence and the misery every day, whether through personal involvement or media reports. Where we fail is in determining what to do about it.

Society accepts alcohol and separates it from other drugs. But alcohol is a drug, and it is at least as bad as morphine derivatives such as heroin. Alcohol costs this country, — especially Alaska — financially, emotionally and in human lives.

Instead of condemning alcohol, as we do heroin, we blindly accept the violence and the human toll, and we deny that the problem exists.

The continued separation of alcohol from other drugs causes a public misconception of what alcohol abuse is, and our acceptance of it hides the dangers of alcohol and alcohol substitutes.

In both the Wainwright and Quinhagak incidents, adults were involved and should have been more responsible. The two cases cited were highly publicized due to their location and their devastating impact upon the communities. However, the problem exists throughout Alaska and the United States. A less publicized case of toxic poisoning, which fortunately did not result in death, occurred in Anchorage several months ago.

The first step in changing the acceptance of alcohol is the realization that it is a drug, and drinking it is drug abuse. This step is missing from almost all programs to eliminate the use of alcohol.

The next step is to stop denying that we have a problem. I applaud the Denakanaaga board of directors, composed of elders from the Interior; the Tanana Chiefs Conference; Doyon Ltd. and other organizations as well, for recognizing the dangers of drug abuse and for moving to declare war on alcohol.

It is deadly — and it is killing us.