

Drink Spiking – ‘Rapist in a glass’ or ‘Urban Myth’?

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The whole issue of drink spiking and drug rape has been clouded by poor evidence, little research and a spate of anecdotal reports and media stories that do sometimes resemble urban myths. Despite this poor situation, concern about the problem has prompted a range of prevention programs from agencies all around Australia and overseas.

This presentation will review:

- early drink spiking interventions,
- further evidence that a problem exists,
- new research and developments that have arisen, and
- describe how this ‘evolution’ of drink spiking interventions has contributed to the development of the W.A. Police Drink Spiking Education Project.

Early Prevention Programs

Early drink spiking prevention programs targeted women and promoted a range of protective behaviours they could adopt to reduce their risk. These included:

- never leave your drink unattended,
- buy your own drinks,
- look out for your friends etc.

While these are important steps they would appear to be an insufficient response to the problem on their own. Some of the shortcomings with these early programs were:

- there was little evidence of change after the intervention,
- all the responsibility for prevention is placed on women,
- there was no change to the pub environment (the crime is still easy to conceal!)
- there was no change in male cultural attitudes – either among perpetrators (who did not see they were doing anything wrong!) or among male jurors.

Other problems arise from the wide ranging viewpoints on drink spiking that are largely based on anecdotal experience. Some stakeholders feel that there is no problem, that the victims just drank too much and use the ‘oldest excuse in the book’. Others are concerned that this is a ‘rapist in a glass’ and we just see the tip of the iceberg. To improve our interventions we need to look critically at the situation and search for further evidence.

Research

Detective Chief Inspector Peter Sturman of UK Police, surveyed 125 victims of drug assisted sexual assault as well as 400 stakeholders and found¹:

- 70% knew their attacker,
- Drugs were administered via alcohol (54%), via soft drinks (19%), via tea, coffee, hot chocolate (11%),
- Around half the incidents were in pubs and clubs,
- 42% of victims were over 30 years.

DCI Sturman concluded that there was “a small but growing problem worldwide”. This report can be found on the website he established at : www.drugrapetrust.org

In NSW, a sexual assault agency (the Eastern Sydney Area Health Service) began monitoring drug assisted sexual assault in 1998 and now estimate that 25% of their clients allege drugging².

In W.A., reports to Police that matched a drink spiking scenario increased 10 fold from 1999 to 2000 and have stayed at that level through 2001/02.

A US forensic study³ analysed urine samples from 1179 victims of sexual assault who alleged drugging and found:

- 40% were negative to any drug,
- 38% showed alcohol,
- 8% Benzodiazepines,
- 4% GHB (Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate), and also
- polydrug use (in 35%) and illicit drug use (in 37%).

In addition, there have been a small number of successful prosecutions for drug assisted sexual assault in the UK, USA and Australia. By piecing together all of the above sources of information we obtain a more accurate picture of the nature and extent of the problem.

Prevention – further developments

Domestic violence prevention workers with the NSW Violence Against Women strategy, began working with licensees to make structural changes to the drinking environment⁴. This involved providing drink spiking information to licensees, bar staff and crowd controllers and improving their first response to incidents. This strategy helps change the pub environment from one where the crime is easy to conceal to one where more people are aware of the danger and know how to respond.

A literature review commissioned for the NSW Violence Against Women strategy⁵ highlighted the differential responsibility placed on women to prevent the crime. They advocated a need to place more responsibility on perpetrators, or potential perpetrators, to prevent the crime. The UK research¹ suggested that some perpetrators do not see drink spiking as a crime, rather an extension of getting a girl drunk to have sex with her. Sturman¹ also suggested that many men were not aware of the legal definition of consent. He claimed they were not aware that an unconscious woman cannot give ‘free and voluntary’ consent to sex and that sex without consent is a sexual assault.

The UK research report¹ advocated the best solution was proving the offence and increasing the number of successful prosecutions. The author recommended improving our process of gathering evidence by encouraging complainants to keep the suspect drink/glass for analysis and to report earlier to police, so that urine samples could be gathered.

W.A. Drink Spiking Education Project

The W.A. project has tried to incorporate all of these developments in a comprehensive approach that targets not only the individual but also the environment and culture that enable the crime to occur. The strategies include:

1. Convenience advertising aimed at women and men,
2. Liquor industry partnerships,
3. Further information for police, and
4. Peer education

1. Convenience Advertising

These are poster style advertisements in the toilet areas of pubs and nightclubs with displays near the hand basin, hand dryer or on the backs of doors. They are a cost effective way of reaching the target group when they are socialising at licensed premises. They were placed in 35 premises in 'high risk' locations (where previous drink spiking incidents had been reported).

Female poster

The poster targeting women reminds them to take protective measures and provides a suggestion of the potential consequences of drink spiking. It also emphasises that drink spiking is a crime and encourages women to report the incident as early as possible to police or bar staff. A dispenser on the poster display unit enables women to take a wallet card with further information such as:

- Further protective behaviours
- What to look out for – the signs and symptoms of drink spiking
- How best to respond – including safety, reporting, obtaining evidence
- Where to get further help – Police, ADIS phone numbers

Male poster

The poster targeting men firstly emphasises the criminal aspects of drug assisted sexual assault and outlines the definition of consent. A secondary message aims to engage non-perpetrators to also be on the lookout and to call Crimestoppers if they have information on perpetrators that could help police.

2. Liquor Industry partnerships

The Liquor Industry Council has been an active partner in the project. They are concerned about drink spiking on licensed premises and obviously have a vested interest in preventing it. In consultation, two resources were produced for liquor industry staff. These were:

- Information brochure – with background information (drugs used, the effects, physical signs), what to look out for, how best to respond, how to make premises safer.
- Response card – checklist for best response to incidents including victim's safety, medical attention, reporting to Police, assist evidence collection (urine sample, suspect drink, person of interest)

3. Further information for Police

It was identified that officers at police stations, where complainants may make the first report, were not familiar with new developments in this crime. An information package was developed that covered research, drugs used, the effects, modus operandi, evidence, prosecution and reporting procedures.

4. Peer Education

The drink spiking project information and resources were incorporated into an existing peer education program at the University of Western Australia. Student volunteers distribute wallet cards at open days and functions where alcohol is served.

Outcomes

The advertising campaign has run from March to the end of June 2002. It has been well received by police officers, liquor industry staff and agencies like the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) and ADIS. The advertising agency reports that 16,000 wallet cards were taken by female patrons from the dispensers during the four month campaign. One of the aims was to encourage women to report incidents of drink spiking and these reports to police have increased by 75% over the campaign period.

The overall aim of the project is that:

- greater awareness of the problem,
- an increase in prevention measures,
- an improved response to incidents and
- better evidence gathering

will help discourage the practice but also contribute towards greater apprehension of perpetrators. This in turn sends a clear message to potential perpetrators that their actions are criminal and they will be caught.

While some of the early indicators are encouraging, it is still too early to tell if these law enforcement objectives have been achieved.

For further information or resources from the W.A. Drink Spiking Education Project e-mail: Alcohol&Drug.Coordination@police.wa.gov.au

References

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