## **Profile** Sally Casswell: champion for communities tackling alcohol

Every conference held by Sally Casswell, director of the Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE) at Massey University, New Zealand, starts and ends with a Maori blessing, says Derek Rutherford, chair of the UK's Global Alcohol Policy Alliance. "This is not lip service", says Rutherford. Casswell, he says, has a sensitivity and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the Maori people and deep concern for the health and social wellbeing of Pacific Islanders. As one of the founders of the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance and the Asia Pacific Alcohol Policy Alliance "her recognition of the advocacy role of non-governmental organisations in the field of alcohol policy can be seen at international and regional levels", he notes (listen to podcast for an interview with Casswell).

Maori people have higher rates of alcohol abstention but heavier drinking than Pakeha (non-Maori) people. Since Casswell emigrated to New Zealand in the 1970s, she has witnessed a "renaissance of power and influence of Maori in various sectors". SHORE works in partnership with the largest Maori social science research group in the country, which is "terribly exciting and a learning experience for Pakeha", she says. Community concern by various groups was what led Casswell to become a leading researcher and developer of alcohol policy. Unregulated markets and social changes led to an increase in alcohol consumption in New Zealand, which resulted in community pressure on the government to respond to the issue. Casswell is now looking at the broader effects of heavy drinking on such areas as child protection, drink driving, the workplace, and the family, as well as finding out how specific ethnic groups respond to marketing by the alcohol industry.

Research on alcohol marketing is so vital, Casswell notes, because the alcohol industry needs to continue to recruit new cohorts of young drinkers who drink as much as, or more than, the previous cohort. This policy is driven by obligations to shareholders, and has led to an expansion in marketing and promotion initiatives. What is interesting, she says, is that more than 50% of alcohol-marketing budgets is now spent outside of the traditional mass media, often in viral marketing, such as when local radio and the internet are used to encourage friends to exchange information as part of competitions for alcohol-sponsored events with free drinks. Policy experts, she says, "are unexposed to this sort of marketing", which is part of the same drive that has resulted in the development of many sugary, coloured alcoholic drinks "and associates the brand and drinking with the key elements of the identity of young people".

"Not for her to leave the findings of research to gather dust on some university library shelf but with belief in the validity of those findings, Casswell will actively advocate their implementation", says Rutherford, who describes her as "a practical, 'hands-on' social scientist". Casswell admits that she is known for being forthright—prepared to stick by what she believes the evidence shows. For example, classroom-based education about alcohol is ineffective, she says, and money must not be wasted on it. Good school-based education can increase knowledge and change attitudes but does not change behaviour in the long term. "We do need to change people's environment", she insists. To change production or demand is incredibly hard, she explains, since it involves regulation of producers or reduction of social inequalities and other measures to change the relation between alcohol use and vulnerable people. Instead, she points to the effectiveness of various measures, from implementation of legal drinking ages and taxation that also changes the social ideas and norms about alcohol consumption.

Casswell moved to New Zealand from the UK to join a former mentor from Sheffield University, Professor Peter McKellar, and did her PhD on cannabis and human behaviour. But she subsequently began to research alcohol as the major recreational drug of choice. Several years of work with Griffith Edwards, ex-editor in chief of Addiction, as part of a panel of unpaid experts led to publication of the groundbreaking books Alcohol Policy and the Public Good and Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity. Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity, she insists. "It's a hazardous substance and more unregulated than any other drug". She was a member of WHO's expert committee that reported on alcohol-related harm in 2008 and since then Casswell has been calling for a Framework Convention on Alcohol Control, developed and regulated by WHO with support from health-care and law-enforcement professionals.

Casswell is pleased that she drank little as a young person growing up in the UK at a time when drinking levels were lower, especially now more is known about the effects of alcohol on the developing brain. She enjoys a glass of wine and the occasional cocktail party, but she balances this with yoga, tai chi, and a love of nature, the bush, and the beaches of New Zealand. She is proud of her son at university and is sustained by her family and friends. But what also sustains her is her coffee addiction and being a self-confessed "research junkie". "A five-star person in the modern publichealth field", and someone who is distinguished by their ability to use evidence to direct policy recommendations is how Edwards describes Casswell, adding that "She cares about the person in the street. She can think in terms of both populations and individuals."

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See **Series** pages 2223, 2234, and 2247

To listen to an **interview with** Sally Casswell in The Lancet's podcast see http://podcast. thelancet.com/audio/lancet/ 2009/9682\_27june.mp3