

## Winning the Kwaso War!

Government authorities have rightly become alarmed with the making, distribution and sale of the local home brew, Kwaso, in and around Honiara town and further afield. In a climate of expensive legally produced alcohol--a single bottle of locally brewed beer costs at least \$8.00--the home brew variety costs but a fraction, is readily available at all times of the day and night and, more importantly, is accepted at all levels of society.

Parliament recently discussed the issue and its most potent weapon to win the Kwaso War has been to pass legislation restricting yeast imports, an essential element for local brew production. Of course the police are expected to continue their search in town and village areas for stills producing the illegal brew and close them down permanently. But society is already close to losing the Kwaso War! If these then are the only steps taken to reduce and finally root out the last illegal still in the country. Kwaso drinking has taken the country by storm because the nation, its leaders and many of its male followers, desire an alcohol-fueled society

We have gone far along in excusing painful and humiliating conduct--wife beating, domestic violence towards children--because the husband had been drinking. Somehow society is becoming less and less outraged at the killing and maiming of innocent victims in traffic accidents because the driver was under the influence. It is rare for a government function, a major donor-agency get together or public gathering that doesn't feature 'healthy' amounts of beer, wine and the hard stuff. In other words, we are deeply into the process of creating an alcohol culture which grows stronger by the day.

Kwaso drinkers have not been slow at getting the message. Drinking until drunk is often publicly acceptable, tolerated and in certain sectors of society not criticized because 'everyone does it'. Having a drink after a day's hard work to wind down changes easily into two or three men downing a full carton of beer or even two if the money holds out. In that atmosphere it is hard, if not next to impossible, to dry up illegal places of alcohol production if society politely accepts the ravages of the use of this legal drug .

Closing down the illegal stills, as important as this action is, doesn't come to grips with the real problem facing us. Our society has gone a long way in blessing or at least allowing serious and continuous drinking to go unrecognized. The Kwaso War will be won when all levels of society understand how this drug of choice, legal as it is, is ruining us, our society and our country.

Dr. Oberli, formerly the head of No. 9's Surgery Ward, publicly objected a few years back that the number of hospital beds given over on a monthly basis to rehabilitate the dying and seriously injured from the effects of drink driving was terribly high. Our nation couldn't afford it then and it certainly can't afford it now. Dr. Oberli's comments came at a time when Kwaso drinking was less a problem and only a few knew how to brew alcohol. Now with Kwaso drinking becoming more the norm, the number of vehicles crowding Honiara's streets growing and society's more accepting view of alcohol drinking, the number of hospital beds given over to the effects of drunken driving is alarming.

At present alcohol excess comes under the health rubric. People suffering diabetes, heart trouble, overweight, high blood pressure, etc. are firmly warned against alcohol use. But the social effects over and above the health issue surrounding serious drinking are known to be just as destructive to the body politic as personal bodily injuries. Domestic violence, little money for family food, poor nutrition, communal fighting, many traffic accidents, criminal offences, etc. due to excessive alcohol drinking are actions with serious implications for society. In 1992, for instance, more than half (54%) of all reported criminal offences were alcohol-related. With the rise of Kwaso over the past few years, however, this figure has grown higher

Part of our problem is that government's alcohol policy has had low priority both in the past and certainly at present. There is no specific policy on alcohol control and prevention. Yes, government legislates alcohol production, imports and taxes. There is traffic legislation on road users but insufficient enforcement of the law. At long last the Ministry of Health is strengthening the non-communicable disease unit to address alcohol. But it is up to the ordinary citizen to realize the serious effects the overuse of alcohol has had not only on personal health but the effects of this drug on society in general.

High-quantity drinking is usually a male problem while at this stage it remains uncommon among Solomons women. Identifying the at risk groups is an important step forward in planning ways to cut down on alcohol use. Although excessive alcohol use primarily affects the family and small groups, it is necessary for all parts of society--business, church, government, private organizations--to team up to highlight the drain that heavy drinking does to society's fabric. Alcohol abuse is a serious health problem! It undermines society! Above all it drains away human wealth at a time the nation can least afford it.