Ambulance attendances for alcohol intoxication among mid age and older Victorians

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Background
In our regular reporting of the AOD Ambos project, the average age of attendance for alcohol intoxication is around 40-41 years and this has been gradually increasing. Media and a substantial amount of research has focused on young people and this has resulted in those from about mid age being overlooked in the area of alcohol intoxication.

Those 40 years and older are a large cohort, they include the baby boomers born post war through to 1964 (approx.). In terms of numbers they are a cause for concern especially around future and current service demand and harm. The ageing population is not a new phenomenon. Examining consumption more generally, research shows an inverse relationship with age, and the focus tends to move to the younger age groups. Many analyses statistically adjust for age and consequently masks what is happening in these older groups. Furthermore, the conventional means of calculating consumption results often in an average consumption volume. Even the Australian alcohol guidelines are premised on averaged consumption.

Where older age groups have been examined the focus is in the 65 plus groups. The focus however has not been about intoxication but consumption, often low risk consumption and the interplay with ageing morbidities and prescribed medications. This is important work however intoxication is excluded.

Measuring intoxication is challenging. Using secondary data sources restricts what is available. Heavy episodic drinking has been used as a proxy for intoxication or getting drunk. Hospital data does have the capacity to code for intoxication but these codes are rarely used. In examining the literature on those in mid age and older regarding intoxication there is a deficit of research. Language complicates the issues and our standard measures of consumption tend to hide it.

The Ambos project offers an opportunity to examine alcohol intoxication specifically over time for age and gender. This paper explores age and gender trends over time from 1999 to 2016 in metropolitan Melbourne, and 2011 to 2016 in regional Victoria.

Method
Data has been derived from the Ambos Project. The Ambos Project was established in 1998 and is funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. The project was restricted to metropolitan Melbourne until 2011, when it was expanded to the rest of Victoria. Turning Point receives patient care records (electronic since 2006) from Ambulance Victoria and these records are examined and coded by a dedicated team of researchers at Turning Point adhering to strict protocols. The result is an extensive database spanning 18 years and over 500,000 cases relating to alcohol and drug-related attendances, as well as mental health, self harm and suicide since 2012.

This paper examines alcohol intoxication only. This is defined as the immediate or recent over or inappropriate ingestion of alcohol and where the assessment of causality is that only alcohol was involved in causing the attendance. That is as far as could be ascertained no other drugs were involved.

The age groups of interest are 40-49y, 50-59y, 60-69y and 70-79y. The 15-39y have been included for context. Sex and age specific rates were calculated and reported per 100,000 resident population. Financial years are reported. Melbourne metropolitan area includes for three metropolitan regions – NorthWest, Eastern and Southern metropolitan regions. The remainder of the state is defined as regional Victoria.

Results

Ambulance Victoria. Ambulance Victoria as collaborators and for data provision. The Ambos Project is funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.

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