

# Message in a bottle

Researchers look to alcohol sales for clues to substance abuse in British Columbia

by Jennifer Cador

The halls are decked, the malls are packed, and the Christmas cheer is flowing. During the season of making merry, office Christmas parties, and family gatherings, often the last thing we want to do is look too hard at how much of that holiday cheer we're actually dipping into.

But there's no question, alcohol spells trouble for many, and that's where psychologist Dr. Tim Stockwell comes in. As director of the Centre for Addictions Research (CARBC) at the University of Victoria, Stockwell is examining drinking patterns and their consequences across the province.

It's part of a major pilot project initiated by Health Canada and led by CARBC to monitor alcohol, drug and tobacco use on a national level. Part of that process includes studying liquor consumption habits in BC—as measured by alcohol sales—to calculate per capita rates of alcohol consumption, area by area.

"We use demographic data to work out what the

average is per person in each area, and we're putting that up on the CARBC website," says Stockwell.

The information comes directly from liquor licensing authorities and is broken down into 28 colour-coded areas so that it's easy to identify where the heaviest drinking is going on, and how one area compares to another.

Of course, some areas can be tricky to measure. "There are tourism areas where the local rates appear to be very inflated," Stockwell explains. "For example, around Tofino it's much higher than the rest of the island. That's because sales are divided by the number of residents, making it look like a lot of alcohol is being drunk by a very few people. We have to factor that out."

So who are BC's biggest drinkers? You might think it would be people in major centres, such as Vancouver or Victoria. But, in fact, south coasters tend to tinkle less than their northern neighbours. "In northern BC we see higher consumption than in the rest of the province," observes Stockwell.

Why? There's no definitive answer yet, but getting

to the root of these patterns is one of the main reasons for the project.

There is a need, explains Stockwell, to collect consistent and reliable data to identify where the worrisome consumption trends are. Then policy-makers, health authorities and the public can come up with solutions to persistent substance abuse problems.

CARBC will play an active role in finding solutions by using the data collected to evaluate alcohol and drug policies. For example, if there was a move to privatize alcohol sales, as in Alberta, CARBC could evaluate the implications.

Stockwell is on familiar ground. Until arriving at UVic two years ago, he headed Australia's National Drug Research Institute. It was his successes there that drew Health Canada's interest.

"We used the data to evaluate big policy changes, such as changes in alcohol tax, and they [Health Canada] said 'We need this for Canada.'"

Stockwell

## EDGEwise

The Pilot Alcohol and Other Drugs Surveillance Project is funded by the federal and provincial governments, including the Michael Smith Foundation and the Provincial Health Services Authority. Funding for the measurement of BC alcohol use patterns comes directly from the BC Mental Health and Addictions Research Network.

BC alcohol sales data show the Stikine and northern Rockies regions as having the highest alcohol consumption rates. Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley have the lowest. To compare alcohol consumption rates in your area with the rest of the province, visit the CARBC website at [www.carbc.uvic.ca/research.htm](http://www.carbc.uvic.ca/research.htm).

Canada's low-risk drinking guidelines recommend no more than nine drinks per week for women, 14 for men, and no more than two drinks on any one day for both men and women.

CARBC's 2004 survey on risky alcohol use in BC found that 73 per cent of reported alcohol consumption was above Canada's low-risk drinking guidelines.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$82 million in external research grants and contracts in 2005-06, up nearly 150 per cent since 2001-02.



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