

The American Issue

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What's an 'AWOL machine'?

Rev. Mark Creech, Executive Director
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While attending the annual convention of the American Council on Alcohol Problems (ACAP) in September of last year, Dan Ireland, president of that organization, came up to me and asked: "Mark, when are you folks in North Carolina going to do something about those AWOL machines being marketed out of Greensboro." My response was one of complete surprise, responding: "What's an AWOL machine?" That's when Ireland educated me about one of the newest and worst forms of alcohol abuse, I believe, ever known to man.

AWOL stands for "Alcohol Without Liquid" -- a device consisting of an oxygen generator and a hand-held vaporizer into which the user pours his or her favorite alcoholic beverage. The device produces a mist of alcohol inhaled through the mouth, allowing the alcohol to enter the bloodstream through the lungs and traveling straight to the brain. Many medical experts say the machines, marketed as "the ultimate party toy," produce a quick and intense high off alcohol.

Some have gone so far as to say AWOL is to drinking what smoking crack is to snorting cocaine. Teresa A. Barton, interim executive director of the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, said the devices have "no purpose other than to get you drunk." [1]

AWOL, invented by British entrepreneur Dominic Simler, was introduced in the United States in 2004 by Greensboro-based Spirit Partners, Inc., who owns the sole rights to marketing the machines in America. Spirit Partners president, attorney Kevin Morse, contends the idea that AWOL gives its users an instant buzz is a myth. [2] Yet Simler, the machine's inventor, says the vapor produces an instant "high." [3]

That's confirmed in a report by DRAM (Drinking Report for Addiction Medicine) which argues that when a person uses AWOL, the alcohol vapor bypasses the consumer's stomach and liver. The liver's function is to break down harmful substances like alcohol; but with AWOL, the liver doesn't filter the alcohol absorbed through blood vessels in the lungs. DRAM contends "inhaling as a route of administration usually permits psychoactive drugs to cross the blood brain barrier most rapidly compared to other routes of administration. Similarly, the subjective effect of inhaling is that of a more potent drug experience." [4]

When considering what the medical community has to say about AWOL, the health dangers involved are incredibly frightening. Michael Silver, a specialist in pulmonary and critical care at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, examined AWOL in 2005 and discussed its dangers with the Philadelphia Inquirer. "Alcohol is a potentially toxic substance when applied directly to living tissue," he said. Unlike the stomach, "which can take a huge amount of insult, your lungs aren't built for that." [5]

The further danger is that once the alcohol is inside the lungs, the body has no way to quickly force the toxin out. Unlike drinking too many drinks, which may induce vomiting, with AWOL the body can't fight back. In short, "there is no throwing up from the lungs," said Richard Dalby, a professor at the University Of Maryland School Of Pharmacy. [6]

Dalby contends little is known about the effects of alcohol on the lungs and that inhaling such substances could bring bacteria and mold into the lungs and cause anything from food allergies to anaphylactic shock and death.

Certainly, the scariest aspect of AWOL is its appeal to youth. Today more than a third of young people begin drinking by eighth grade, and five-million high school students binge drink at least once a month. [7] Two out of five college students are binge drinkers; approximately 1,700 college students die every year due to an alcohol-related incident. [8]

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Susan K. McComas, a delegate to the Maryland Legislature, has no doubt that AWOL is being aimed at youth. The mother of four boys drafted anti-AWOL legislation after finding a flyer advertising the machine on her car while she was parked at a community college.

Laurie Dudgeon, executive director of Kentucky's Office of Drug Control Policy, is also convinced that AWOL is attractive to underage users. "It's something that can be passed at parties," she told WAVE 3 reporter Janelle MacDonald. "It's going to have a certain lure that's going to appeal to children and youth that may not appeal to an adult." [2] Indeed, for many youth in today's party atmosphere, the concept of "huffing" alcohol would be just a new way to get high.

Armed with these facts, when the North Carolina General Assembly convened in January, I took this matter before lawmakers and they agreed our state needed a ban on AWOL machines. Legislation was introduced by Senator Steve Goss (D-Watauga) and passed both the House and Senate by a unanimous vote. The bill was signed by Governor Mike Easley on June 27.

As of April 2007, alcohol vaporizing machines have been banned in 21 states. North Carolina makes 22. But North Carolina's law has a potential national impact in that it will make it illegal for Spirit Partners to continue to sell or possess the AWOL devices in the Tar Heel State. That means they'll have to give up the AWOL business or move to another state where it's not illegal. Although the former scenario is preferable, if I were a betting man I'd bet on the later.

Perhaps before reading this article, you asked, as I once did: "What's an AWOL machine?" Well, now you know. And if you live outside of North Carolina or the other 21 states where the devices are banned -- Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming -- then the question to you is similar to the one that was put to me almost a year ago: "When are the folks in your state going to do something about those AWOL machines?"

Resources

[1] Join Together News Summary, "17 States Have Banned Alcohol Inhalers."

[2] Janelle MacDonald, "Groups Work to Ban Alcohol Device in Kentucky," Wave 3, November 22, 2006.

[3] Gizmag electronic magazine, www.gizmag.com/go/2633, Health and Wellbeing.

[4] "Alcohol Without Liquid: Has Science Gone AWOL?" The DRAM, Drinking Report for Addiction Medicine, Vol.2, Num. 2, March 1, 2006.

[5] Kathy Boccella and Mario Cattabiana, "A Ban on Breathable Booze?" Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 28, 2006, Page B01.

[6] Robyn Lamb, "Md. lawmaker seeks to ban sale and use of device ...," Baltimore Daily Record, March 25, 2005

[7] Statement of Joseph A. Califano, Jr., chairman and president of The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University on release of "Teen Tiplers: America's Underage Drinking Epidemic," Feb. 26, 2002

[8] Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV, Center for Science in the Public Interest <http://www.cspinet.org/booze/CAFST/QuickFacts.pdf>

Rev. Mark H. Creech is the Executive Director of the Christian Action League of North Carolina, Inc. He acknowledges the assistance of freelance reporter L.A. Williams in the research and writing of this commentary.

The Office of Applied Studies Report (AOS Report) / October 18, 2007

This issue of the AOS Report presents facts about adolescent substance use, including information on the initiation of substance use, past year substance use, and receipt of substance use treatment. The data presented in this report are from the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the 2005 Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS), and the 2005 National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services (N-SSATS). Copies of this report or other reports from the Office of Applied Studies are available online: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov>.

Date: 10/18/2007

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NEW REPORT PROVIDES STARTLING LOOK AT SUBSTANCE ABUSE ON AN AVERAGE DAY IN THE LIFE OF AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

Number of Adolescents Using Marijuana on an Average Day Vastly Exceeds Half of the Number of All Students Registered in New York City Schools

On an average day, nearly 1.2 million teenagers smoked cigarettes, 631,000 drank, and 586,000 used marijuana, according to the latest data, in a first-of-a kind report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

The report, which highlights the substance abuse behavior and addiction treatment activities that occur among adolescents on an average day, draws on national surveys conducted and analyzed by SAMHSA's Office of Applied Studies.

The report, *A Day in the Life of American Adolescents: Substance Use Facts*, presents a stark picture of the daily toll substance abuse takes on America's young.

Among the report's major findings is that on any given day during 2006 nearly 1.2 million adolescents ages 12 to 17 smoked cigarettes, 631,000 drank alcohol, 586,000 used marijuana. In addition, each day nearly 50,000 adolescents used inhalants, 27,000 used hallucinogens, 13,000 used cocaine and 3,800 used heroin.

To provide some perspective on these figures, the nationwide number of adolescents using marijuana on an average day equals more than half the total number of students enrolled in New York City's public school system during the 2006-07 school year.

"While other studies have shown that significant progress has been made in lowering the levels of substance abuse among young people in the last few years, this report shows many young people are still engaging in risky behavior," said SAMHSA Administrator Terry Cline, Ph.D.

Cline spoke at the Double Jeopardy CASACONFERENCE on co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorder in young people at The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. "By breaking the data down and analyzing it on a day-to-day basis, we gain a fresh perspective on how deeply substance abuse pervades the lives of many young people and their families," Cline said.

The report also sheds light on how many adolescents ages 12 to 17 used illegal substances for the first time. On an average day in 2006:

- Nearly 8,000 adolescents drank alcohol for the first time;
- Approximately 4,300 adolescents used an illicit drug for the first time;
- Around 4,000 adolescents smoked cigarettes for the first time;
- Nearly 3,600 adolescents used marijuana for the first time; and
- Approximately 2,500 adolescents abused pain relievers for the first time.

The report also analyzes the most recent available data to indicate how many people under age 18 were receiving treatment for a substance abuse problem during an average day in 2005. These numbers included:

- Over 76,000 in outpatient treatment,
- More than 10,000 in non-hospital residential treatment, and
- Over 1,000 in hospital inpatient treatment.

This report was drawn from SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Treatment Episode Data Set and the National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services, and contains many other important facts about adolescent substance abuse, treatment and treatment admissions patterns.

The full report is available at <http://oas.samhsa.gov/2k7/youthFacts/youth.cfm>. Copies may be obtained free of charge by calling SAMHSA's Health Information Network at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727). For related publications and information, visit <http://www.samhsa.gov>.

SAMHSA is a public health agency within the Department of Health and Human Services. The agency is responsible for improving the accountability, capacity and effectiveness of the nation's substance abuse prevention, addictions treatment, and mental health services delivery system.

American Council on Alcohol Problems

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PURPOSE: American Council on Alcohol Problems is the channel of cooperation through which state temperance organizations, national religious bodies and similar concerned groups and individuals in America can unite to deal with the problems caused by alcohol and other drugs.

ACAP provides the forum and the mechanism through which concerned persons can find common ground on alcohol and other drug problems and address these issues with a united voice. It is the successor organization to the American Temperance League and the Anti-Saloon League established in 1895. Membership of ACAP presently is made up of 30 local temperance organizations, 22 national Christian denominations, and other fraternal organizations that support ACAP's philosophy of abstinence.

(ACAP is classified by the IRS as a 501 (c)(3) tax-deductible charity.)

Checks should be made payable to:

American Council on Alcohol Problems

Mail to:

2376 Lakeside Drive, Birmingham, AL 35244

TO:

ACAP Officers

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President-elect: William E. Day, AL

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Center for Science in the Public Interest /For Immediate Release: September 4, 2007

NFL Linebacker Case Highlights League's Ties to Alcohol Money, Says CSPI

League Penalizes Players for Alcohol Abuse While Profiting from Beer Sales

WASHINGTON—While the National Football League (NFL) talks a big game about not tolerating substance abuse among its players, it is simultaneously enabling alcohol abuse among its fans by aggressively advertising beer on TV and in stadiums, where it also sells alcoholic beverages, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

This inconsistency was recently noted by Hamilton County (Ohio) Municipal Court Judge John Burlew during a hearing for Cincinnati Bengals linebacker Odell Thurman, who was suspended from the NFL last season. Odell was first suspended for four games after skipping a drug test, and later for the remainder of the season after an arrest for drunken driving. Thurman will face Judge Burlew again and could receive jail time for violating probation, according to the Associated Press.

“The allegations are that you had a legal substance—alcohol—in your body, a substance which they advertise and get money from, millions of dollars a year from,” Burlew told Thurman, adding that if the league was serious about alcohol abuse prevention, it would stop alcohol sponsorship and selling alcohol in stadiums.

In a letter to NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, CSPI Alcohol Policies Project Director George Hacker and CSPI’s Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV Manager Tracy Downs pointed out that the positive values children learn from sports should be detached from the promotion of alcohol. New research on alcohol advertising “suggests that exposure to ads and branded paraphernalia is related to increased quantity and frequency of drinking and intentions to drink among teenagers and adolescents,” Hacker and Downs wrote.

“It is troubling that alcohol marketers use sponsorship as a vehicle to reach large numbers of young, impressionable children with messages that indelibly link alcoholic beverages with popular sports such as football,” they added.

In May 2007, Commissioner Goodell extended the league’s ban of alcohol in locker rooms to include all team functions and travel and told the 32 NFL teams that by serving alcohol, they impose “significant and unnecessary risks to the league, its players and others.” Goodell’s decision sent a strong message that alcohol use can be detrimental to the NFL, but this message is at odds with the NFL’s own alcohol advertising policy, according to CSPI.

CSPI urged the NFL to eliminate alcohol ads during telecasts, and weaken the link between alcohol use and sports. The Campaign for Alcohol-Free Sports TV seeks to reduce the amount of alcoholic beverage advertising to underage children and young adults who tune into televised sports.

For more information, contact: Center for Science in the Public Interest

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