



# Heroes and booze: the unhealthy mix at the core of our culture

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OPINION

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Peter Cosgrove in VB's "Raise a Glass" Anzac ad. Photo: YouTube.

HEROES and drink often go together in Australia. Kids get mixed messages about alcohol and this week you could find them in VB's "Raise a Glass" Anzac ads.

Raise a Glass raises money and awareness for the RSL and Legacy's welfare programs. This is a good thing. But when a beer maker funds an ad featuring a war hero gazing out to sea with two amber ales, you know many meanings are at play.

In the ad, General Peter Cosgrove sits in a bar and tells us that this year VB will again donate \$1 million to veterans' welfare. "I'll be raising a glass to the men and women [serving] in the Middle East," he says. "Who will you raise a glass to?"

The ad starts and finishes with a lingering shot of two foaming beers. It's for a good cause, yes, but as one YouTube viewer wrote, "Foster's is using Anzac Day to sell VB."

In another, subtler ad, young war widow Bree Till sits on a beach beside an empty deckchair and a second, untouched glass of beer. This is the beach where she married her husband, Brett. He died in Afghanistan "doing his job". Only a stone would be unmoved by this heartfelt video and obviously many widows and veterans support Raise a Glass.

Still, Cosgrove's ad, in particular - which has aired at times when children watch TV - implicitly links heroism to alcohol. The message that we should honour our soldiers by drinking seems self-serving, to say the least. Each of us has our own way of reflecting on Anzac Day. It's also fraught, given how many returned soldiers and their families have been harmed by alcoholism.

VB's Raise a Glass website says visitors must be "legal drinking age" to enter. This seems to confirm that while soliciting public donations, it's also promoting beer.

And the cynic in me can't help wondering how the amount raised ("over \$3.7 million" since 2009) compares with Foster's advertising and marketing budget. VB's 2009 "regulars" ad alone (featuring a parade of "regular heroes", from manscapers to cashed-up bogans) had a production budget of about \$2.8 million.

When it comes to another breed of heroes - sportspeople - children are also soaking up alcohol-drenched marketing.

Carlton Draught is an AFL sponsor. On the AFL website, the Carlton Draught Match Centre is "the home of live footy", with scores, videos and match reports. Call it up and you'll get a fleeting, full-screen image of a golden glass of beer.

On Cricket Australia's website, you'll find updates on the "VB Tour of West Indies". (VB is a Cricket Australia "platinum partner".) I watched Mitch Starc (in VB T-shirt and cap) interview wicketkeeper Matt Wade (also styled by VB). "We played the Australian way," said Starc. "Obviously, we fought really hard."

Below this interview were portals for dedicated kids' content: Milo in2 Cricket and Aussie Cricket Crew. Cricket Australia also sells a

replica one-day players' shirt sporting the Southern Cross, the coat of arms and the VB logo.

Such connections, it's true, are not new. As a kid in the '70s, I once schlepped to Crittenden's bottle shop just to get Rod Marsh's autograph. But we now know a lot more about the harmful effects of heavy drinking. And marketing to kids has become far more pervasive.

This week, a study found that half of all alcohol ads on free-to-air TV were being shown during programming that is commonly viewed by both adults and children. The two-month study, led by the University

of Western Australia, looked at

2810 alcohol ads worth \$15.8 million.

Lead researcher Professor Simone Pettigrew says although alcohol ads are banned during children's dedicated programming, many children watch TV from 8.30 to 10.30pm. "In that two-hour time period about half the [alcohol] ads we looked at were on," says Pettigrew, director of UWA's Health Promotion Evaluation Unit.

Many contained elements that appeal to children, such as humour, friendship themes and animals. (Think of the Tooheys ad featuring a herd of deer; the Jagermeister stag; the Thirsty Camel.) There was also an emphasis on bulk buying.

Pettigrew thinks alcohol ads should not be shown on TV until after 10.30pm. (I saw the Jagermeister ad during the afternoon footy on Anzac Day.)

But marketing and sponsorship deals are ways for companies to bypass any guidelines on advertising to children. Marketing, says Pettigrew, is about imbuing a product with positive qualities such as "mateship and honour and standing up for your country".

I am not a wowser. Frankly, after this week watching the heart-wrenching documentary *Restrepo*, which followed a platoon of American troops in Afghanistan, I'm surprised more veterans don't turn to drink. But there's a double standard in the messages we're sending children about alcohol.

On the one hand, tough new laws ban adults from offering even one drink to a child at home without parental consent. On the other, we let cricketing heroes be plastered with beer logos and barely raise an eyebrow as VB welds itself to the Anzac story.

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