

# **An innovative online intervention: The Steering Clear First Offender Drink Driving Program**

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## **Abstract**

Drink driving remains a substantial public health issue warranting investigation. First offender drink drivers are seen to be less risky than repeat offenders, though the majority of first offenders report drink driving prior to detection, and many continue to drink drive following conviction. Few first offenders are offered treatment programs, and as such there is a need to address drink driving behaviour at this stage. A comprehensive approach including first offender treatment is needed to address the problem.

Online interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing risky behaviours such as harmful substance use. Such interventions allow for personalised tailored content to be delivered to individuals targeting specific mechanisms of behavioural change. This method also allows for targeting screening to ensure relevance of content on an individual level. However, there have been no research based online programs to date aimed at reducing repeat drink driving by first offenders.

The Steering Clear First Offender Drink Driving Program is a self-guided, research based online program aimed at reducing recidivism by first time drink driving offenders. It includes a specialised web app to track drinks and build plans to prevent future drink driving. This allows for elongation of learning and encouragement of sustained behavioural change using self-monitoring after initial program completion. An outline of the program is discussed and the qualitative experience of the program on a sample of first offenders recruited at the time of court appearance is described.

## **Introduction**

In Australia, over the decade between 2001 and 2010 on average some 1600 people died annually as a result of traffic crashes (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, & Local Government, 2010) and around a third of fatal crashes have alcohol use as a contributing factor (National Road Safety Council, 2010). According to the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020 (Australian Transport Council, 2011), interventions for drink driving may provide a substantial benefit to road safety. This report noted, in relation to the period between 2001 and 2010, that:

‘There was some strengthening of drink driving measures over the decade, including adoption of tougher sanctions and the introduction of alcohol interlock programs for repeat or high-range offenders. However, while drink driving behaviour has been contained to a small proportion of the driver (and rider) population, it continues to be a major cause of serious road trauma — and there is evidence that a substantial proportion of drink drivers have serious alcohol abuse problems. In recent years there has been increasing focus on interventions targeting this ‘hard core’ minority of offenders’ (p. 13).

It notes that a key action should be to review international best practice and identify cost effective interventions for dealing with high risk and repeat traffic offenders. The Steering Clear First

Offender Drink Driving Program aims to reduce the risks of repeat offending, by providing a cost-effective brief and research based method of intervention at the time of first conviction.

In Queensland in 2010, a drink driving discussion paper was tabled by TMR, as despite road safety gains achieved as a result of enforcement activities such as RBT, strengthening drink driving legislation including penalties and sanctions, public education campaigns, advertising campaigns and offender education programs, drink driving remains a significant factor in serious crashes on Queensland roads. In 2011/12, more than 3.3 million breath tests were performed (Queensland Police Service, 2012). The Queensland Police Service aims to test licenced drivers once per year, so the number of breath tests performed increases each year to keep up with population growth. The number of drink driving offences remains above 25,000 per year in Queensland alone, with the majority being detected with a BAC equal to or under 0.149g/100ml, and 73.1% of these being first time offenders, (TMR, 2010).

The TMR discussion paper noted that brief educational intervention may be particularly relevant to first time drink driving offenders, given the effectiveness of these programs over no treatment (TMR, 2010). In terms of delivery method, it was suggested that an online program may be an effective way to utilise technology and provide a widespread program to those who live in rural or remote areas or have employment or family commitments that prohibit them from being able to attend a face-to-face program (TMR, 2010). Based on the responses obtained to the questions outlined in this discussion paper, it was found that 74.9% of community respondents supported the initiative of mandatory brief educational interventions for first time offenders with a BAC less than 0.149g/100ml (Soole, King, & Watson, 2010).

While these discussions continue, there are no current programs targeted specifically at first offenders available in Queensland. The purpose of building the Steering Clear First Offender Drink Driving Program was to provide an option that would fill the gap in first offender assessment and treatment. The program is initially being trialled as a pilot program in Queensland with the potential for it to be tailored to other jurisdictions.

### ***Online interventions for drink driving prevention.***

Online interventions have had promising outcomes in the reduction of risky behaviours, including problematic alcohol use (White et al., 2010; Riper et al., 2011). In the context of drink driving, a brief online intervention for first time offenders could have the following benefits:

- Cost effectiveness
- Access
- Privacy and anonymity
- Autonomy, self-paced learning
- Compliance due to flexibility
- Social acceptability
- Interactive tailored learning

There also could be limitations of online drink driving programs, for example:

- The program may not be undertaken by the offender
- For some of the highest risk offenders such as high range and repeat drink drivers, more intensive face-to-face programs may be more suitable
- Confronting a therapist/facilitator may increase the specific deterrence effect

There are likely to be other benefits and limitations of online interventions designed to reduce drink driving and further research needs to be conducted to address any identified barriers, as well as to determine whether online programs demonstrate effectiveness in reducing risky illegal behaviour.

### **Program content**

The program content is based on previous research into the behaviour of first offender drink drivers and the factors that lead to reoffending following a conviction (Wilson, 2015). The program has 5 core modules:

- Standard drinks
- Alcohol and the body
- Consequences of drink driving
- Planning ahead
- Your alcohol use

The program also includes an evaluation (questionnaire) module and an automated follow up email with a Certificate of Completion and personalised summary of the program attached. Program completion unlocks a self-monitoring web app that can be used at any time to track drinks and update plans to avoid drink driving.

### **Pilot methodology**

The pilot evaluation has ethical approval by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (no. 1400000214). The pilot involves recruitment of first time drink driving offenders at the time of conviction in the Magistrates Court who are approached and asked if they would like to participate in the research project. Offenders are given a unique login code where they can access the program from their own home computer or mobile device. The program takes around 1.5-2 hours to complete, and pilot participants are offered a \$50 voucher as reimbursement for taking part in the research project, sent to them on completion of all modules.

### **Preliminary pilot results**

The pilot commenced in May 2015 in both Brisbane Magistrates Court and Cairns Magistrates Court with the support of the Chief Magistrate.

Early qualitative feedback on the program has been gathered from the offenders who have participated to date. The following are some descriptive responses from the evaluation module for the question ‘what have you learned from the program?’

‘Separate drinking from driving’

‘Measurement of alcohol content’

‘I think I spend a lot on alcohol per year’

‘It’s risky to other road users if I drink and drive’

‘Ways to plan ahead before heading out and drinking’

‘If in doubt, don’t drive, regardless of what others might think’

‘I have to depend on other people if I can’t get public transport’

‘Making plans and right decisions about when drinking and how to know the right thing to be doing’

All of the offenders completing the pilot study to date have provided positive feedback about the program and the statements above indicate that they have considered factors relating to avoiding drink driving and their alcohol use as a result of taking part. The pilot recruitment continues. Future research will be conducted on a larger scale to determine the effects of the program in a longitudinal manner with outcomes such as retention and recall of key learning measures and its potential impact on drink driving behavioural change.

## Conclusion

The Steering Clear First Offender Drink Driving Program is a novel online intervention program aimed at reducing reoffending by first offender drink drivers. Early pilot data suggests that the program is usable and offenders are finding the program to be a positive learning experience. Further research has been planned for the future of the program including a large scale longitudinal trial.

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