

Sobering lack of progress seen on women and alcohol

Roundtable hears Canadians ignore the damage, after report identified booze as one of Canada's most significant public health hazards.



TIM ALAMENCIAK / TORONTO STAR

Ann Dowsett Johnston speaking at the first annual National Roundtable on Girls, Women and Alcohol.

By: [Tim Alamenciak](#) News reporter, Published on Fri Mar 08 2013

Top experts gathered on International Women's Day to plot a course that would alleviate the harms of alcohol for women.

The full-day National Roundtable on Girls, Women and Alcohol was organized by Ann Dowsett Johnston, the 2010 Atkinson fellow who penned a groundbreaking special report on [women and alcohol](#) for the Toronto Star. The 14-part series exposed the substance abuse risks faced by women and largely ignored or stigmatized by the public.

Dowsett Johnston says that in the year and a half since the series ran, little has changed.

“As Canadians we're deeply schooled in the harms associated with trans fats and tanning beds, and blissfully unaware of the harms associated with liquor,” she told an audience of nearly 50 policy experts and addictions workers gathered at 1 Yonge St. “It's as if we're under a spell — and we are — a fantasy around our favourite drug. A fairy tale that stops us from moving forward.

“This despite the fact that the evidence is rock solid.”

Dowsett Johnston organized the conference with the Canadian Women's Health Network as a way to extend the work her Atkinson series did. The [Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy](#) is given out annually to one journalist to explore a topic of their choice with public policy implications.

Also speaking at the roundtable was David Jernigan, the director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. He railed against alcohol advertising that appeals to youth, particularly young women.

He said the shift began in the 1990s, with the introduction of beverages like Smirnoff Ice. The trend has continued with other brands introducing their own versions of the sugary drinks.

“Fast forward to 2013 and we’ve got Smirnoff Ice marketing itself with a quote from Dr. Seuss,” said Jernigan, referring to a [post on the Smirnoff Ice Facebook page](#) with the quote, “Why fit in when you were born to stand out?”

Earlier this week a report from Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health highlighted alcohol as one of Canada’s [greatest public health challenges](#). The study recommends indexing alcohol prices to inflation and taking measures like the stern warning labels seen on cigarettes.

The report also recommends scaling back advertising.

“Earlier generations knew they had to create a monopoly in Ontario. They thought of that creation — I don’t believe they thought of an LCBO that had marketing attached to it,” said Dowsett Johnston.

“We’re seeing a situation where even the brightest girls are hoodwinked into believing that alcohol is essential and key to their happiness.”

Toronto councillor Adam Vaughan, whose ward includes the Entertainment District, was at the roundtable. He said he has taken heat in the past for [clamping down on clubs](#) in his area, but says now other councillors are asking him how to deal with the issue in their wards.

“We’ve significantly reduced the concentration of big box nightclubs and what’s happened now is they’ve started to pop up elsewhere in the city. Councillors who five years ago thought I was an alarmist are now starting to ask me, ‘How do we deal with this?’ ” said Vaughan.

Dowsett Johnston and other experts at the conference are experiencing the same thing Vaughan did at first — their concerns often fall on deaf ears, blocked by a comfort with drinking.

“As we all know we romance the glass in our culture,” she said.

When asked what the progress has been in the two years since her series ran, Dowsett Johnston replied, “We haven’t begun to scrape the surface.”

Clarification: This article was edited from a previous version that did not state the conference was co-hosted by the Canadian Women’s Health Network.