

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
College Binge Drinking
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. Every year on college campuses in this country more than 1,000 young people die in alcohol-related incidents. Why is drinking on college campuses so common, and why do so many of us ignore it? On this edition of *About Health TV* we're joined by the nation's leading expert on college drinking, Dr. Henry Wechsler from the Harvard School of Public Health. His college alcohol studies were the basis of his new book, *Dying to Drink – Confronting Binge Drinking on College Campuses*. Dr. Wechsler, thanks so much for coming in and talking with us.

DR. WECHSLER: I'm happy to be here.

JEANNE BLAKE: You studied this issue for so many years and you actually write in your book that the problem is worse now than ever. What's going on?

DR. WECHSLER: It's a problem very much like living near a bad smell. After a while, you don't smell it anymore. Alcohol in this country is present everywhere, and it's present everywhere that young people are. For example, football games cannot be seen without beer commercials, prizes for the best athlete in the game are usually named after beer, stadiums are named after beer, and in fact there are teams named after beer.

JEANNE BLAKE: So I can understand that the influence through the media permeates our youth, but what is it about the college campus that – I mean, you write in your book that one-third of students on college campuses would be given an alcohol abuse diagnosis under psychiatric criteria. I mean, that's just phenomenal.

DR. WECHSLER: Colleges, since the beginning of our country, have been associated with alcohol. Thomas Jefferson complained when he was president of the University of Virginia about student drinking. So this has been a problem that has been with us for a long time. What has happened is that over the years it's increased. Women, for example, now drink more on college campuses than they ever did before, and this equality of the sexes has added to the drinking environment. Why is it there? It's there in college rituals. It's there in alumni's fond recollections of awful times that they had when

they were in college.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you think that young people ... we have some clips that might help put this in perspective, but we hear so much about binge drinking. First of all, why don't you define for us what binge drinking is?

DR. WECHSLER: Binge drinking is drinking enough in a short period of time to put the drinker at risk for a variety of problems. We define it in terms of five drinks in a row or more for men and four drinks in a row or more for women in the past two weeks. But binge drinkers usually drink more than that. That's just the bottom limit.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well let's take a look at this video clip, and it will give us both the perspective which, I think we both already have, that young people and a lot of other people don't really understand what binge drinking is. Let's take a look.

[VIDEO CLIP]

COLLEGE STUDENT 1: If they're missing class, like, twice a week I'd say, due to drinking, that would be binge drinking, I'd say.

COLLEGE STUDENT 2: I would define binge drinking as drinking probably more than on the weekends, because I think that on the weekends most people drink socially, but if you drink more than two or three times, like if you start to drink from Wednesday until Sunday, I think that's a little excessive.

COLLEGE STUDENT 3: Binge drinking? I guess, in my opinion, would be just drinking to the extent where you just throw up.

COLLEGE STUDENT 4: Binge drinking is when you just keep drinking and you try to get ultimately gone and you just are so gone you don't know what's happening.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: What do those clips tell you about young people's knowledge of the power and the danger of alcohol?

DR. WECHSLER: They tend to equate alcohol with pleasure and with social interaction.

JEANNE BLAKE: But they don't understand, obviously, from their comments what it means to binge.

DR. WECHSLER: No, they don't. They probably think that bingeing is nothing, that it's fun, and unfortunately the heaviest drinkers do just that. When I come on to a college campus and talk about five drinks in a row, many of them will say to me, "What's five drinks? I can drink ten drinks or more in a row and it doesn't affect me." And I tell them, "That's your problem, that you can drink ten drinks in a row without being affected, because that's a sign of having an alcohol problem."

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's jump to sort of the other side of this and why it's allowed to happen. You define in your book the problems of access, that it's very easy to get alcohol, and, by the way, as you know, it's not just in college. A vast number of young people in high school say alcohol is so easy to get.

DR. WECHSLER: Easy to get and cheap.

JEANNE BLAKE: And cheap, right. Especially on college campuses, where we hear young people talking about how you can get it any night of the week and it's really cheap, and a lot of times it's free. But it's being allowed, and not just by the law enforcement officials, but the college administrators. So what are we supposed to do?

DR. WECHSLER: A parent said to me, "Beer – so what? Thank goodness it's only beer; it's not a drug." And the unfortunate thing is that many people think that we only have to worry about illicit drugs, that beer is an American drink and we don't have to worry about beer. Well, beer kills more people when it's misused than all the illicit drugs put together, from heroin down to cocaine and speed and so on.

JEANNE BLAKE: Alcohol is alcohol is alcohol. I think it's a misperception among young people as well that I'm just drinking beer, it's not a problem. Do college officials that you have talked with have that same misguided sense of how dangerous it is?

DR. WECHSLER: The ones that have to clean up don't. The health center officials who see people coming in on weekends, not just wasted but injured, don't think it's a laugh. The administrators who

have to discipline students for things ranging from date rape to disturbing the peace don't think it's a laugh.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Wechsler, why is it so allowed? I mean, 1,400 deaths a year on college campuses, and we all know what happened at MIT with Scott Kruger. I mean, does it take a death for someone to wake up and change the laws and enforce the rules? Why do people do that? What will it take?

DR. WECHSLER: It will take the realization that binge drinking doesn't only hurt the drinker, and the theme is, "Ah, so they'll grow out of it," but it hurts other people too. Drunk drivers don't only kill themselves, they kill other people.

JEANNE BLAKE: But that's not a news flash. I mean, we know that.

DR. WECHSLER: But that's what it's going to take. It took Mothers Against Drunk Driving to change the laws and attitudes about drunk driving, and they weren't reacting to one death. They were reacting to tens of thousands of deaths on our highways. Until recently, we used to make fun of drunks who got into cars, and movies would show them driving around. Nobody was really hurt, but a bunch a fenders were dented. And so drunk driving wasn't viewed as the danger it is. I think it's going to have to take that with regard to the other problems caused by heavy drinkers.

JEANNE BLAKE: But I still don't understand why so many college administrators turn and pretend it's not there.

DR. WECHSLER: It's a question of worrying about your applicants. They don't want to be known as the stone cold sober schools listed in the Princeton Review.

JEANNE BLAKE: That says a lot.

DR. WECHSLER: But it does, because they're afraid they're going to lose applicants who may feel that, well, we won't come here because there's no fun here.

JEANNE BLAKE: But in your book, *Dying to Drink*, for folks who didn't hear the title, that in *Dying to Drink*, you talk about the University of Rhode Island, where the president of that college took the problem on, and there is a case study that it can work to a college's advantage.

DR. WECHSLER: He even found that the average SAT scores at school went up after they changed policies.

JEANNE BLAKE: Tell us just a little bit more about what happened at the University of Rhode Island.

DR. WECHSLER: President Carothers took a brave stance and barred alcohol from most things on campus. As a consequence, he found that the campus life, the quality of life improved and the SAT scores of incoming classes ... he attracted better students in the future.

JEANNE BLAKE: And it took a year or two for that to happen, but he stuck with it.

DR. WECHSLER: I think both students and colleges have to realize that college should not be a Club Med, and in a sense, many students are there for that purpose. Part of the problem is that some students don't know why they're in college, and until they find out, they're going to drink and do these crazy things for the lack of anything else to do.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's listen to what some young people said. They underscore that point exactly.

[VIDEO CLIP]

COLLEGE STUDENT 1: If I didn't drink at all in college, I don't know what I would do on the weekends, really. Most of the time it's going out to have drinks, most of the time when you go out to eat you have drinks. Yeah, I don't know what I would do without drinking.

COLLEGE STUDENT 2: The college experience without drinking probably wouldn't be as much fun.

COLLEGE STUDENT 3: If I didn't drink it probably wouldn't be as fun, period.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Wechsler, when you hear young people in those clips describe the social environment that you call the Club Med atmosphere, you know what they're exposed to, but what are

they doing in their brains with the real-life incidents? I'm going to quote a couple of statistics from your book. Those who drink before 21 have an increased risk of unintentional injury and involvement in alcohol related injuries, car crashes, you said, before it affects their grade point. We know that it's directly related to incidents of depression and suicide and homicide and, you know. Whereas all that in a clip that we hear young people talking about, Oh my God, the college experience without alcohol, I can't imagine it.

DR. WECHSLER: College students and young people in general don't worry about long-term consequences of drinking, and you can't scare them out of drinking by giving them the facts about what kinds of problems are associated with heavy alcohol use. That just isn't going to work.

JEANNE BLAKE: What will work?

DR. WECHSLER: I think for one thing, we have to reduce the pressure on them to drink, and that pressure is not just peer pressure, which most people focus on, but it's also beer pressure. It's the advertising and it's the marketing of alcohol. The marketing being that you can buy 10-cent beer around college campuses or 25-cent beers, or if you're a woman you can get free drinks on ladies nights in certain bars. It's giving people a pass for \$5 with a cup so they can keep going back as many times as they want to drink.

JEANNE BLAKE: Which, of course, I mean, I'm also so struck by the fact that it is illegal in this country under age 21 to drink and there's a whole lot of drinking on college campuses among young people under 21, and it does go back to the question of why colleges are letting this happen. You've already described that so well, but the alcohol industry, as you well know, denies it targets young people.

DR. WECHSLER: And yet 48% of all the alcohol consumed by college students is consumed by underage students. So something isn't working quite right.

JEANNE BLAKE: How much of a responsibility do you think goes back to the parents who have raised children with a set of values that allows them to use, and I mean use alcohol?

DR. WECHSLER: At least 50%, and that's essentially what we find, that half of the binge drinkers on college campuses did so in high school or earlier.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's take a quick look at some of the reasons that young people drink and then we'll come back and talk about the parents a bit more.

[VIDEO CLIP]

COLLEGE STUDENT 1: I think people drink socially because they're pressured to drink socially, not because they really want to, because alcohol is not the best tasting thing in the world. So I think that's a lot of the reason, especially when you're trying ... especially when you're a freshman and you're trying to get adjusted to the school, you end up, I guess, going into crowds that you wouldn't normally go to if you were home, because you're kind of away from home, too.

COLLEGE STUDENT 2: College is a new experience, so they want to try to meet as many people. I think that drinking helps to lower your inhibitions and go out and be more open towards meeting new people, talking and stuff like that.

COLLEGE STUDENT 3: A lot of kids drink because, yes, they drink because they're pressured to drink, but a lot of kids also drink because it's another way to socialize, it's another way to meet people. It's kind of like meeting a friend over a cup of coffee.

COLLEGE STUDENT 4: Some people feel like binge drinking or have a problem with drinking, or it might be more of like an escapist sort of thing. Like facing reality, self-medicating.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Wechsler, there's a lot of research that underscores what the young people said. I think that among young people more so now than ever, young people are using alcohol to cope.

DR. WECHSLER: They're using it for a variety of reasons, many of which indicate that they have certain problems that puts them to drink. But they're not simply drinking because of those problems. They're drinking because they perceive others to be drinking and they're drinking because, in a sense, colleges give them the message "Welcome to college, this is where we drink." They used to greet people with kegs on arrival. They don't do that anymore, partly because of more knowledge about the scope of this problem and partly because of fear of liability with all of the lawsuits against colleges based on incidents that have occurred.

JEANNE BLAKE: I just want to draw a distinction, though. This whole “welcome to college and forget about your freshman year, you’re just going to be drunk all year,” you say yourself that the same people binge in college that binge in high school. So what happens?

DR. WECHSLER: What happens is that instead of about 30% binge drinking in high school, there’s 44%. So a large number of people join the binge drinking group who did not drink that way before. College increases it, and it increases it because of the traditions, from naked Olympics at some schools to tailgating and homecoming weekends and other such traditions. Also because of the fraternity and sorority systems, which are really lost in a sea of alcohol. We found that 75% of the students who live in fraternity or sorority houses are binge drinkers, three out of four. Now, fraternities are claiming that’s an improvement, because in 1993 we found that 82% were, so it’s a little less.

JEANNE BLAKE: It’s down 6%.

DR. WECHSLER: But I wouldn’t uncork the champagne to celebrate that drop.

JEANNE BLAKE: Parents are sending kids off to college. You offer ... actually, the book has so much good information, I hope every parent that has a kid going off to college will buy this book. You offer ten points of how parents can communicate with their kids and a ten-point approach to helping your child sort of put the whole thing in context. Can we go over a few of those?

DR. WECHSLER: I think the key one is communication. Kids who have a communication line open to their parents have less problems with alcohol and other issues than those whose parents don’t communicate. But communication isn’t just through lecture; it’s by example. Kids see as well as hear, and so a parent must set an example with drinking and not simply tell their son or daughter what to do.

JEANNE BLAKE: The other thing that you encourage parents to do is delay as long as possible that first drink.

DR. WECHSLER: The basic finding in literature is that the earlier one starts drinking and becoming drunk, the more the chance of developing alcohol problems.

JEANNE BLAKE: But how do you do that? How does a parent delay that first drink? I mean, we can do a whole hour-long documentary on that, but in one minute, I’m wondering, how does a parent do

that?

DR. WECHSLER: Well, first of all by letting the child know that they want them not to do it. Some parents will say, Thank God it's only beer, and really downplay the importance of drinking beer, as if it were tonic. It's not tonic; it's an alcoholic beverage with equal properties to a shot of alcohol or wine, and so parents have to realize that beer, when misused, can be as dangerous and even more dangerous than illicit drugs.

JEANNE BLAKE: The other thing that I see over and over and over again on the work that I've done on underage drinking is that parents think that if the kids party at their house and they throw their keys into the middle of the room, and I know that you address this in your book, that everything is okay and at least they're drinking there. I can't tell you the times I've heard that "at least they're not driving." What about all the other stuff?

DR. WECHSLER: Colleges take that same attitude, by the way. They say, We'll let them drink on campus and we'll give them kegs so they won't go off campus and kill themselves in automobile accidents. We studied colleges that ban alcohol and compared them to those that don't. There are no more automobile accidents or drunk driving in colleges that ban alcohol than in other colleges. So it's based on a false premise.

JEANNE BLAKE: And it's also ignoring the other risks of the sexual risk-taking and the unintentional injuries that occur with kids falling off of a balcony or ...

DR. WECHSLER: Or the date rapes, the acquaintance rapes. Women who drink so much that they qualify for being frequent binge drinkers, 10% of them report being forced to have sex in that school year against their will. That's a high number.

JEANNE BLAKE: For a parent looking for guidance from you, you say set rules and enforce consequences. First of all, I think a lot of parents are afraid to do that because they think, Well, I drank when I was a kid, and so my kid is going to drink, and then everybody drinks and then it will drive my child underground. But you say, Go ahead and set the rules and enforce the consequences. Give us an example of how you do that.

DR. WECHSLER: Well, the rules are no drinking, and if drinking occurs you ground the student. You've got to assert yourself as a parent. You're not simply a friend to this younger person. You're

their father or mother, and I think you have to act accordingly. The other thing is, people tend to remember their college days in a funny way. They forget all of the unpleasant aspects of heavy drinking when they're in school and just have these fond memories through an alcoholic haze of how wonderful it was. There are many moments of heavy drinking that are not wonderful. Some of the students tell about them in our book.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, there are a whole lot of those, and that goes back to the statistics that we referenced and that somehow we do hear about those, but then when you talk with people about their experiences, you say it becomes sort of this rosy party and everybody's having fun.

DR. WECHSLER: And students tell their parents, I work hard, so I play hard. But the truth of the matter is that the people who play hard don't work as hard as people who don't play that hard. They have lower grades, they miss more classes, and academically they don't achieve as much as the people who don't binge drink.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let's end on a positive note. What's your sense of hope around this very tough issue.

DR. WECHSLER: If I didn't, I wouldn't be doing this. Look at smoking in this country. Look at what's happened to smoking, because we realized that smoking doesn't only hurt the smoker but through secondhand smoke hurts other people. Rooms are now smoke-free and the smokers are outside huddled by themselves.

JEANNE BLAKE: But that took an aggressive movement.

DR. WECHSLER: And that's what we need.

JEANNE BLAKE: But do you see signs of that happening?

DR. WECHSLER: We see signs of that happening. In a number of colleges there are town coalitions working together to solve the problem. Colleges cannot solve this problem by themselves. They need the help of city and town officials in dealing with it. We have to work both with the demand of students who drink alcohol and the supply of alcohol, which is outside of the college. I think we can solve this problem if we resolve to do it and decide to do it over a long term. If it doesn't work in the first few days, don't quit.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think the key to that, too, is remembering the formidable force that towns and colleges and parents are fighting, and there's the alcohol industry with almost a bottomless pit of money to put toward influencing young people. The college norm programs are an example. They say that they're doing a lot of education on campuses but you say it actually can tend to encourage drinking.

DR. WECHSLER: One of the bizarre things in this Alice in Wonderland world is that on many college campuses the alcohol industry sponsors educational programs about responsible drinking. The latest version of this are social norms programs which try to tell students that you think there's more drinking on this campus than there really is and there really isn't so much. This satisfies some university administrators, because it says that we don't have as much of a problem. It certainly satisfies the alcohol industry, takes the pressure off reforms, but we haven't seen it change the level of drinking on college campuses.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, as you say, Dr. Wechsler, perhaps over time. And if enough people read your book! Thank you so much for coming in and talking with us about this important issue. We appreciate your time.

DR. WECHSLER: It's been a pleasure.

JEANNE BLAKE: And again, Dr. Wechsler's book, put out by Rodale Press, is called *Dying to Drink – Confronting Binge Drinking on College Campuses*. I'm Jeanne Blake. Thanks for joining us, and I'll see you next time.

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