Server intervention: An overview

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ABSTRACT

Server intervention trainings for bar personnel have a lot of potential in preventing drunkenness and impaired driving. Servers of alcohol are a logical starting place for mounting a programme or training to change drinking behaviour. The first server intervention programmes are originally developed in the United States of America in the eighties. Evaluation studies are indicating that server intervention results in more interventions by trained bar personnel, customers with a lower blood alcohol level and less alcoholrelated traffic accidents. But for a real effective approach an integral approach is needed, in which server intervention is just part of it.

INTRODUCTION

Most alcoholrelated traffic accidents do occur in weekends at night. In The Netherlands each year around 200 people die and around 4000 people are injured because of alcoholrelated traffic accidents. It can be concluded from national and international research that a great part of intoxicated drivers comes from bars, cafés, discotheques or restaurants (Söder, 1990; McKnight, 1991). Most part of all alcohol is consumed at home, but the later the time of day the greater the chance that alcohol is consumed outdoors. Fifty percent of the drivers with a blood alcohol level above 0,7 promille in weekends comes from a bar. This increases up to 60% if we are talking about the drivers with a blood alcohol level above 1,3 promille (Mattijssen, 1995). The total number of intoxicated drivers in weekends at night, that is above the Dutch legal limit of 0,5 promille, is 4-5%.

Those who are at greatest risk of driving while under the influence are relatively more violating the (traffic) laws, relatively drinking more alcoholic beverages and are more often
visiting bars, cafés or discotheques (McKnight & Streff, 1994; McMillen et al, 1992). An Australian study (Peberdy, 1991) shows us that 59% of the people who died in an alcohol-related traffic accident had their last drink, just before the accident, in a bar and 33% with friends at home.

It is evident that servers of alcohol are a logical starting place for mounting a program or training to change drinking behaviour of their patrons or their friends. Servers of alcohol promote the immediate environment conducive to responsible drinking. The most significant factor influencing the decision to drink (and drive) or not to drink (and drive) is the social environment. Moreover, places of public resort such as bars are more easily to approach than people at home. And, not only as a prevention strategy for driving while intoxicated but also as a prevention strategy for other alcohol-related criminality such as violence and vandalism. Bars with high risk for alcohol-related criminality can be characterised by: serving alcohol to obviously intoxicated customers; organising happy hours; permitting crowding (Stockwell et al., 1993). This relevant kind of information can be included in server intervention programmes. Moreover, prevention strategies should be directed at those high risk drinking settings.

The first server intervention programmes to prevent unresponsible drinking are originally developed in the United States of America in the eighties. Nowadays server intervention programmes are also implemented in other countries such as Canada, Australia and the Netherlands (Kayser, 1992). Most of these programmes are training programmes directed at transfer of relevant knowledge and training of skills (recognising people who are under the influence or who are just about to drink too much; prevention techniques) using textbooks, instruction books, videotapes and role plays.

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

Without any scientific proof for the efficacy of it, server intervention training programmes were initiated in the early eighties. Only one relevant study is done in these early years. Langenbucher and Natahan (1983) showed that police officers are in some degree able to estimate diverse levels of being under the influence while a group of professional servers of alcohol and social drinkers were not able to do that. They also showed that many intoxicated
drivers came from bars. This study does not tell us anything about the efficacy but supports the need of server intervention.

In the late eighties a few evaluation studies are done. The study of Russ and Geller (1987) and Gliksman and Single (1988) were indicating that trained bar personnel initiated substantially more interventions than did untrained bar personnel. Examples of interventions are: slowing down service, provide (not salty) snacks, offer non-alcoholic beverages, make driving related comment, deter buying of rounds when there is more than one drink per person on the bar.

Studies of McKnight (1987), Saltz (1987) and Saltz and Hennesy (1991) demonstrated that patrons of trained bar personnel showed less signs of being under the influence, reported drinking less glasses of alcohol and reached lower levels of blood alcohol concentration (BAC). Especially when there was management support from the establishments the level of being under the influence of the customers was reduced.

The studies of Wagenaar and Holder (1991) and Holder en Wagenaar (1994) demonstrated that server intervention can eventually have positive effects on alcoholrelated traffic accidents as well. The 1991 study showed that, directly after the implementation of the Dram Shop Law in Texas, single-vehicle nighttime traffic accidents (assumed alcoholrelated) reduced significantly, corrected for other influences such as increasing the minimum drinking age and making wearing seat belts mandatory. It seems that alcoholic beverage server liability (including being legally responsible for the behaviour of your customers) frightened owners of establishments that much that it resulted in behaviour change of both themselves and their personnel. Unfortunately, long term results are not known.

The 1994 study gives even harder evidence of the efficacy of server intervention. This study was executed in the State of Oregon where server intervention training for people working in licensed bars was mandated in 1986. This offered a unique opportunity to investigate the efficacy of server intervention. Three months after mandating these trainings the number of single-vehicle nighttime night accidents reduced with 4%. After one year these accidents decreased 11%, after two years it decreased 18% and three years after mandating these
trainings it decreased significantly 25%. In that period of 1986-1989 60% of all licensed bars were trained.

Conclusion: server intervention can have positive effects. It leads to more interventions by trained bar personnel and customers drink less alcohol resulting in lower BAC. Moreover, mandating server intervention training programmes for servers of alcohol can result in less alcoholrelated traffic accidents.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Research demonstrated that server intervention can work, but why and under what conditions does it work? It is assumed that drinking behaviour is directly influenced by the social environment. The risk to drive while under the influence will be reduced by modification of the drinking environment. It is also known that situational factors such as the number of heavy drinkers and the volume of music on the premises is influencing the drinking behaviour of customers. Especially the drinking behaviour of young people is determined by the actual drinking situation (Van de Goor, 1991). The server of alcohol has a unique position to influence drinking behaviour of his or her patrons. The server creates the immediate environment conducive to responsible drinking. This community position of gatekeeper or intermediary brings servers of alcohol into strategic contact with all persons who could cause alcoholrelated problems. They are a success factor in the design of effective prevention programmes.

The problem is how to implement server intervention. In the Netherlands server intervention training is not mandated. Bar personnel can participate in these trainings on a voluntary basis. That way, one will only reach a few motivated people. However, starting January 1996 it is mandated that all bar staff must have certain knowledge about the effects of alcohol on the behaviour of people. Therefore all owners of establishments must pass a new exam “social hygiene” in which elements of the server intervention training is included. But it is all too theoretical, no skills are practised.

Alcohol legislation including mandating server intervention trainings for all bar staff is the first determining factor for a successful implementation of server intervention. The study of Holder en Wagenaar (1994) proved that Dram Shop Laws and mandating server intervention
trainings can be successful in preventing alcohol-related accidents. Nevertheless, even without a stimulating alcohol legislation it is clear that server intervention is a useful strategy to influence the behaviour of bar personnel and the policy of owners of establishments in a positive way and through them the drinking behaviour of customers and the alcohol-related problems such as vandalism, driving while intoxicated and traffic accidents caused by them. How server intervention can influence alcohol-related problems can be seen in figure 1.

Legislation gives the opportunity to penalise irresponsible serving. In the USA the law ("Dram Shop Liability") is a strong motivation for people to participate in server intervention training. If a customer causes an accident the server of alcohol has to prove he did everything he could have done to prevent the accident. Referring to participation in a server intervention training will support the server and may lead to discharge of prosecution.

As the USA can be considered as a judicial society where everyone can be sued for the least little thing, the Dutch situation is different. In The Netherlands one appeals more to the moral responsibility of servers of alcohol and the responsibility of the drinker himself. As a result a policy of self regulation is agreed between the government and the Horeca (Hotel Restaurant Café) organisations. These organisations, represented by STIVA (Foundation for Moderate Drinking), developed a Code, actualised in September 1996 (STIVA, 1996), in which is stated that all their members act upon the existing alcohol laws with the utmost exertion.

Although Dutch legislation is not as severe as the American legislation, it is for example prohibited to serve alcohol to a drunken customer, to a person under the age of sixteen (eighteen if it concerns spirits) and to have drunken customers on the premises. As with other laws the problem is controlling these laws. There is hardly any control, although by the mentioned Code there is some kind of social control within the group of bar staff. Still, the government may use the legislation to withdraw one's license to run a bar. Until now this is only done in cases of serious disturbance of the peace or in cases of repeatedly drugs dealing. It must be told here that the Dutch government intends to implement a new alcohol legislation to stimulate responsible selling and serving of alcohol.
So participation in server intervention trainings can be stimulated by legislation, by social control (developing a Code) and by integrating it into relevant curricula. Another impetus may be incentives. For example in the USA many insurance companies offer lower insurance rates to owners of establishments and restaurants where 75% or more of the employees are trained in server intervention procedures. A Dutch example is that participants of server intervention in the Province of Gelderland got a shield on which is written "Responsible Hospitality". Hanging the shield on the wall will promote their business and is good publicity. Customers can recognise those establishments and know that there will be responsible and good service.

Although server intervention may have positive effects it depends on the culture of the country under what conditions implementation will be successful. Drinking and server culture is different in each country, even regional and local differences exists. And meeting the specific needs of a (sub)culture is an important condition for an effective programme.

**INTEGRAL APPROACH**

Server intervention itself can have positive effects on drinking behaviour of customers and alcohol related problems such as driving while under the influence. But it will not be
sufficient for a permanent and meaningful change. The approach to the problem of alcohol misuse and driving while intoxicated demands an integral approach. The strategy to develop exerts influence on several risk factors (the multi factor approach), acts upon the same factor through several channels and methods (the multi method approach) and involves different social systems around the target groups (the multi system approach). This concentration of intervention forces enhances the chance that the formulated objectives for preventing a certain problem will be realised (Hosman & Molleman, 1994).

Selling beer in a bar is influenced by many factors such as governmental policy concerning alcohol trade, taxes and licenses, the local policy concerning controlling legislation, rules and values within subcultures, the type of establishment and the chosen means of transport of the drinker. It is evident that bar personnel can not influence all these factors, but they are a crucial factor in modifying a drinking environment discouraging unresponsible drinking and stimulating responsible drinking.

It is recommended that server intervention programmes should be part of an integral approach. Though server intervention is widespread in countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia, it still is implemented very limited or not at all in European countries.

RÉFÉRENCES


