

Tackling Alcohol Abuse Among South African Farm Workers



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ALCOHOLISM is a major issue in South Africa for a number of reasons, including a 'drinking culture' that promotes the excessive use of alcohol during leisure time or for recreation. This is particularly prevalent within rural agricultural communities, and alcohol abuse remains one of the major challenges facing farmers, especially wine farmers, in our country. South Africa has some of the highest rates of alcohol misconduct, risky alcohol use, and rates of violence and trauma associated with alcohol use.

In addition, the adverse health impacts of alcohol abuse are significant among these communities, and for farm owners, the negative impact on productivity can be detrimental. In order to combat the multiple ill effects of alcohol misuse in these communities, farm owners themselves need to get more involved. A multi-level approach, with education drives, comprehensive testing policies, and the right equipment to back these, is critical in tackling alcohol abuse among South African farm workers.

Excessive alcohol consumption is exacerbated in industries such as farming, where workers may be away from their families, or have

little to do in their spare time. In the wine farming industry in particular, this challenge is compounded by a legacy issue dating back to the 'dop system', where farm workers were given part payment in the form of alcohol. While this practice has since been outlawed, the problems of the culture it created persist, and farm workers often spend large proportions of their wages on alcohol.

The challenges that alcoholism creates within farming communities are multiple. Health problems among the farm workers themselves include issues such as fatal liver damage and slowed brain function resulting from long-term abuse. In addition, pregnant women who excessively drink alcohol may cause foetal alcohol syndrome in children, which perpetuates the cycle of damage and disease.

Further to the health problems caused by alcohol, mistreatment also leads to emotional instability, anger, irrationality, anger and aggression, which in turn creates high levels of physical abuse, violence against women and children, disruptions to family and more. For farm owners, alcohol misuse creates a dangerous working

environment, as workers are often under the influence while doing their jobs, while also impacting negatively on productivity. In addition, long-term health problems result in more sick days, again effecting productivity.

While there are currently efforts to stop the over use of alcohol among the farmers, such as the Dopstop Association, additional input, education and policies must come from the farm owners and managers. Ultimately it is in the best interest of farmers and farm owners to tackle the mistreatment of alcohol and become more involved in efforts to curb the physical and social problems alcoholism creates. Lack of education is a primary issue with regard to alcohol abuse and alcoholism.

Farm workers typically are not aware of the detrimental effects on themselves and their families as a result of their drinking. They spend most of their wages on alcohol, which creates a cycle of poverty and social damage from which it is difficult to emerge. Education therefore needs to form a crucial component of any effort to tackle alcohol consumption, and farm owners need to get involved in this process. This education needs to include understandable examples of

the negative effects of drinking on health as well as the financial implications. The positive influences of reducing the violation of alcohol should also be emphasised.

Regular testing for alcohol consumption is also essential, and should form part of the education drive. Farm owners need to develop comprehensive testing policies and procedures around testing, and then educate their workers as to why they are testing and how it works. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that workers understand that testing will not mean they cannot drink at all, but should rather limit their intake within safe levels.

Breathalysers are readily available and are extremely useful in detecting and deterring alcohol abuse. Farm owners need to make use of this technology, in conjunction with policies and procedure, to help curb alcohol among their workers. This will not only be advantageous to the workers, but the farm owners too, who will benefit from better production, happier and healthier workers and better communities. In addition, sober workers will mean fewer accidents and less likelihood of damaged and broken equipment.