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Media Release

RURAL COMMUNITIES COMBAT ALCOHOL HARMS

22 November 2012: A multi-million dollar research project involving 20 towns throughout NSW has shown that coordinated community action does reduce excessive alcohol consumption and harms.

Comprising 13 evidence-based, community-led interventions over a period of five years, and \$2.4 million in funding from the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), the ambitious project is the largest and most rigorous evaluation of a community action approach to reduce risky alcohol consumption and related harms, ever undertaken anywhere in the world.

Officially launched today by The Hon. Kevin Humphries, MP, Minister for Mental Health Minister for Healthy Lifestyles, and Minister for Western New South Wales at Parliament House, Sydney, the Alcohol Action in Rural Communities (AARC) project was effective in reducing alcohol consumption in rural communities, as well as rates of binge drinking, alcohol-related crime and residents' experience of alcohol abuse.

Mr Humphries said the project demonstrated that communities do have an important role to play in complementing State and Commonwealth Government interventions and that when given the opportunity, local communities are prepared to work effectively with their local government, health services, police, schools and researchers to formulate and establish effective evidence-based solutions.

"This world-leading research, conducted here in New South Wales, makes it clear that coordinated community action does make a difference. The results speak for themselves. Given the known relationships between excessive alcohol consumption and poor physical and mental health, these findings are particularly encouraging," Mr Humphries said.

The recent focus on alcohol-related violence in NSW has highlighted that alcohol harms are an issue throughout the State. Chief Investigator and report author, Associate Professor Anthony Shakeshaft, of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, said the AARC project has proven the worth of locally-tailored, community driven action.

"Community action works. Compared to the control towns, the experimental communities saw a 20 per cent reduction in average alcohol consumption, a 42 per cent reduction in residents' experience of alcohol fuelled verbal abuse, a 33 per cent reduction in alcohol-related street offences and a 30 per cent reduction in the number of residents who reported drinking at levels that placed them at high-risk of alcohol-related violence, accidents and injuries. Just as importantly, there was a positive

cost-benefit: for every \$1 spent on community action the value of the returns to the communities was conservatively estimated at between \$1.75 and \$1.37,” Associate Professor Shakeshaft said.

AARC was a partnership between local communities, local government, government agencies, FARE, and the Universities of New South Wales and Newcastle.

The twenty NSW towns in the study included 10 experimental communities (Corowa, Forbes, Grafton, Griffith, Gunnedah, Inverell, Kempsey, Leeton, Parkes and Tumut), as well as 10 control communities (Ballina, Broken Hill, Byron Bay, Casino, Cootamundra, Cowra, Deniliquin, Lithgow, Moree and Wauchope)

Interventions included brief interventions in multiple health settings, high school-based interactive sessions on alcohol harms; improved GP prescribing of anti-alcohol medications and targeting high risk weekends.

Real world research such as the successful AARC project is at the heart of FARE’s approach to research investment. David Crosbie, FARE’s Research Committee Chairman said that over the last ten years, FARE has invested \$115 million dollars and funded 1500 community-based projects and recognises the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of those programs.

“The AARC project was a living breathing experiment that reduced alcohol harms and improved lives. Beyond those communities and this project, the valuable information gathered will be of benefit to other Australians and other communities,” Mr Crosbie said.

Key findings

- The total cost of implementing all 13 interventions in the ten communities was \$608,102 or \$61,000 per community.
- Community action is cost-beneficial. For every \$1 spent on action the value of the returns to the communities was conservatively estimated at between \$1.75 and \$1.37
- The experimental communities saw a 20 per cent reduction in average alcohol consumption, a 42 per cent reduction in residents’ experience of alcohol fuelled verbal abuse, a 33 per cent reduction in alcohol-related street offences and a 30 per cent reduction in short-term high-risk drinkers, compared to the control towns.

Kevin Humphries, Anthony Shakeshaft and Michael Thorn are available for interview.

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Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) FARE is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Since 2001, FARE has invested over \$115 million in research and community projects to minimise the impact of alcohol misuse on Australians. Through our national grants program and commissioned research, FARE has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. We work with community groups, all levels of government, police, emergency workers, research institutions and the private sector to address alcohol-related problems. For further information visit our website: www.fare.org.au