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 their children, which perpetuates the cycle of damage and disease. Further to the health problems caused by alcohol, mistreatment also leads to emotional instability, irrationality, anger and aggression, which, in turn, create 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 intoxicated while performing their jobs; while also impacting negatively on productivity. In addition, long-term health problems result in more sick days, again affecting productivity.

While there are currently efforts to stop the over-use of alcohol among farm workers, 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 that 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. Education needs to include understanding the negative effects of drinking on health, as well as the financial implications. The positive effects 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 does not mean that they cannot drink at all, but that they should rather limit their intake to 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 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 equate to fewer accidents and a lower likelihood of damaged equipment.

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