

Too much, too young

On Friday and Saturday nights casualty departments in the UK overflow with drunken teenagers, some of whom are scared for life after fights and accidents.

Craig McLean looks at three initiatives that are trying to reverse the dramatic increase in underage drinking. Photographs by **Sophie Evans**

Brannigan's Nightclub, Norwich In a cold, concrete, stinking-of-vomit corridor at the back of a nightclub, 17-year-old Diane is lying on the floor, shivering. Dirt is smeared up her knee-length boots and on her knees; her tiny denim skirt is barely covering her crotch. Her hair trails in a puddle of her own sicc, and her cheek is sticky with the stuff. Her eyes are nowhere.

Ben Clayton, 20, crouches over Diane. He is a member of St John Ambulance and a trainee doctor. Nula Cooper, 32, a youth-and-child-protection worker, cradles Diane in a blanket and rubs her back. Ben and Nula are volunteers with the SOS Bus. A 55ft bendy-bus kitted out with first aid equipment, a lounge and sleeping area, it is run by medical staff, counselors and charitably minded citizens. It is parked in Norwich city centre every Friday and Saturday and is open for business from 9pm to 3am. There is a minibus to ferry 'clients' back to the bus – or, if more intense treatment is required, to a sick bay housed in a nearby Portakabin that used to be a sandwich bar.

'Snatch and patch' is how St John first-aidier Jay Wright, 29, one of tonight's crew of eight, describes one aspect of their job. The SOS Bus and about 20 of Norwich's pubs and clubs are linked, via two-way radio, to a central police control room. Rather than waste ambulance resources, the SOS Bus can be deployed as a first option to deal with the myriad alcohol-related problems found on the streets of Norwich of a weekend night – a unique initiative to deal with a far-from-unique scenario.

Norwich is an ordinary place in a Britain where drinking-related injuries account for 70 per cent of weekend hospital admissions. We are the drunk man of Europe, and gradually so. Our city centres are full of huge drinking establishments located in former cinemas, department stores and banks. In Norwich, most of these have some incentive to drink enthusiastically – special DJs, themed nights or Vodka Vibe and Carlsberg at £1.50 all evening. At 2am, everyone hits the streets, and occasionally each other. The kebab shop will see action until 3.30am. As and when the Licensing Act 2003 – opening up the potential for 24-hour

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drinking – is finally implemented, who knows what the streets of Norwich will look like? But right now it's Anytown UK.

And it's different. Four years ago, in a short space of time, three teenagers died in separate, drink-related incidents. Two were found in the River Wensum, one in the back of a club. Local agencies – police, council, business, church – decided something must be done. They weren't going to stop young people drinking. But they could offer a safety net when they did so to excess. The SOS Bus began operating in April 2001.

Binge drinkers, drug abusers, victims of violence, the distressed, the lost, the stray and, occasionally, the merely sick – the SOS Bus offers non-judgemental help to all. Sometimes this means dealing with multiple stab wounds, as Jay once had to. Other times it means providing a blanket and a cardboard bowl in which to heave up an excess of alopcops. Or it simply entails

a cup of tea and calling a taxi, or helping to locate a relative to collect the intoxicated and befuddled. If teenage clients are in fear of familial wrath for being drunk and/or in distress, the bus will endeavour to find the most sympathetic parental ear to collect them. 'You try to soften the blow,' say the volunteers.

Now, at 11.21pm on a drizzly Saturday, Ben and Nula are tending to Diane, their first call of the night. She had been found collapsed in a lavatory cubicle in Brannigan's. Her friend Jill seems fine, upright and sobering fast. They had started the evening with a bottle of wine between them at home. Since they have been out they have had a Smirnoff Ice each. Honest, that's all they've had. Jill looks worried sick. As opposed to Diane, who looks really, appallingly, terrifyingly sick.

'Her condition doesn't tally with the alcohol she's had,' says Ben, 'and not with recreational drugs.' Jill pipes up: 'There was some dodgy bloke standing near us.' A lot of people say their drinks have been spiked, Ben says, 'but we're a bit cynical. Generally it's quite a small number.' Ben decides that, even though medically Diane is not in danger, he can't deal with her in this corridor. Writing notes on the back of his surgical gloves, he phones in for ambulance back-up. 'We've seen a 14-year-old like this,' he sighs. 'It's heartbreaking.'

While Ben and Nula were helping Diane, back at the bus Jay had been ministering to a teenage boy with a head wound. The police had brought him up, handcuffed. He'd been fighting but they weren't going to arrest him – even when he announced that, once patched up, he was off to exact revenge on the lad who'd hit him. 'We'll see him again later,' Jay notes wryly.

A young man found unconscious in a chip shop. A 20-year-old girl, collapsed on the dancefloor of Chicago Rock Cafe; she's fairly drunk, but Jay advises that she get checked for anaemia. A Ukrainian lad, looking for bus timetable information to Ely. Nineteen-year-old Darryl, pushed over while dancing at an indie club, the Waterfront. Someone landed on top of him. Now, as the Undertones' *Teenage Kicks* rattles around the club, he's sitting on a chair near the club entrance, his lower leg – previously injured when he was beaten up at school – looking like an elephant's. Five pints of lager are taking the edge off the pain, but only just.

A giant bouncer has been keeping an eye on Darryl. He and his colleagues in the city's clubs all support the SOS Bus. Previously, if a patron was the worse for wear they'd be turfed outside, or 999 would be dialled. 'But an ambulance or a police car out front doesn't look good,' he says. 'The SOS Bus gives us another option.' The Waterfront, like many local licensed premises, raises money to help with the bus's annual running costs of £50,000 (the rest comes from a mix of public and private purse). Several police forces, including Manchester, Suffolk, Essex and Sussex, have shown an interest in introducing their own SOS bus.

By 1.30am things are winding down. It's been fairly quiet, with eight clients requiring assistance. So far this year the bus has helped 100 under-18s and 282 18- to 24-year-olds. The most common class of ailment is 'injury/unwell', followed by 'drunk', and then 'unable to get home'.

'We're very broad-minded,' says Jay, a boat-builder by

day. 'We've seen most of it and we've heard all of it. A lot of people say, "They've got themselves drunk, leave them like that." But I wouldn't want my child to be left like that.'

Just before closing time, 20-year-old Michelle is extracted from the big Misery nightclub. She looks petrified. Her boyfriend thinks she's only had a couple of bottles of lager, a short or two and a pint – roughly three times the amount a woman needs to drink to qualify as a binge-drinker.

It's almost 3am. There are two final clients: Elaine, a fortysomething 'professional' who lost her pals and can't get any money out of the cash machine for a cab, and a 22-year-old lad who was found slumped on a window ledge. He's in the bus lounge area, sleeping off a bout of staggering and vomiting. Dave Cater, 41, drives everyone home. He's a self-employed builder from nearby Diss, and volunteers on the SOS Bus two or three times a month. Why? 'I've got girls aged six and nine,' he says. 'I'm doing my bit now so that someone else might be doing it when my daughters start going out drinking. Because once they go out the door, you don't know where your children are.'

Acland Burghley School, Tufnell Park, London Darren Abbott-Williams thinks he was about 19 when he was attacked by the blokes with the baseball bats. It was 2am. He, his brother and his cousin were walking home from a nightclub in Dunstable. They'd been drinking, but not to excess; they were jumped for no reason. He's not entirely sure how old he was because around the same 12-month period he was also beaten up by bouncers in a club in Enfield (his friend had refused to buy a stranger a drink; he was

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obviously 'connected', because Darren and his pal were promptly dragged into a side room and laid into). Now Darren has a dent in his head. But what he is sure about is that he would be a lot worse off if it hadn't been for the medical skills of Professor Iain Hutchison, consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery at Royal London Hospital.

Prof Hutchison has had a lot of practice putting faces back together. Research he and some colleagues conducted found that, each year in the UK, 125,000 young people aged 15 to 25 sustain serious facial injuries as a direct result of excess alcohol drinking. This costs the NHS £125 million. Every weekend his accident and emergency unit, like casualty departments all over the country, is a war zone. In 2000, Hutchison founded the Facial Surgery Research Foundation. The foundation's 'Saving Faces – Drink Sensibly' campaign aims to alert young people to the dangers of alcohol.

Prof Hutchison is a pragmatist; he wants to 'inform rather than dictate'. He understands that government 'clampdowns' and scare tactics have a limited reach. He is concerned with effecting a 'cultural change'. Young people like to drink – they like the taste, and they like the sensation. Better to encourage them to drink sensibly. Because if they don't, he can show them what will happen.

It is 8.50 at morning assembly in Acland Burghley secondary school in Tufnell Park, north London. The 170 children of year nine are all aged about 14. Prof Hutchison has come to talk the start of a Saving Faces project: a team of 40 surgeons visit 160



schools around the country. There will be slides, videos, analyses of teenage drinking habits and personal appearances from former patients. 'We judge people on their facial appearance,' he begins, making a play for the one thing that all teenagers understand: vanity. 'Whether they're pretty or ugly. Clever or thick. Whether they're violent or passive. Whether they're weak... I see people coming in with blood pouring down their face. With a broken jaw or nose. Or blinded. They think, "My life has been destroyed. I wish it'd never happened. My God, can't I reverse time?"

It means they're going to be judged for ever. You're a boy with a facial scar, you go in for a job interview and people think, he must be a rough character, I'm not going to give him a job. Or you're a girl who's been hit by flying a bottle in the pub...' He explains what happens when you drink, say, a Bacardi Breezer. It takes about 30 minutes for the alcohol to enter the bloodstream, but you've enjoyed the taste so much you're on to your second, third, before the effect hits. You're on your way to being falling-about-drunk.

He tells the pupils about the 15-year-old who



From top Professor Iain Hutchison talks to pupils at Acland Burghley School in north London; the SOS Bus on its rounds; a St John Ambulance crew help another ailing teenager

was stabbed in the neck after he bumped into someone outside a pub – 'I'm not going to die, I'm not going to die!' he said to me. He did die.' Then he tells them about the young dentist who dropped his glass then fell on it – 'he just missed his eye, fortunately, but he'd glassed himself.'

Prof Hutchison has brought two of his former patients with him. They each give a short talk. Chris was attacked by seven men in 1992. Now he has a hole in his head and is partially sighted. Sophie was jostled during a drunken scuffle between strangers a couple of weeks ago; she had only had a couple of drinks but her reactions were slow. Otherwise she might have been able to stop herself hitting the pavement face first and breaking her jaw in three places.

The matter-of-factness of their injuries – the bland ordinariness, the sheer bad luck of it – echoes around the assembly hall. One of these pupils could be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong amount of alcohol in them. It happens to 2,400 young people every week.

But when you're a teenage drinker, chasing thrills and adulthood, the link between alcohol and violence is not immediately obvious. 'I thought the talk was good, says Pia Singleton, 14, after the talk. She has been drunk a few times, at parties or the festive season. 'Everyone's more lively, more friendly, nobody's embarrassed. You don't have to be drunk to have a good time but it lightens the mood. It's not bad to have a couple of drinks.'

As long as she keeps it that way, Prof Hutchison will be a happy man. 'If you're going to drink alcohol – which I'm sure most of you will – drink it sensibly, slowly,' he had concluded. 'Drink it for the taste. Get that nice feeling, but

don't get that horrible feeling afterwards when you're legless. You're a victim waiting to happen if you get drunk. Alcohol is a dangerous drug if taken to excess. It is a great drug if taken in small amounts. The message is, save your face.'

Harpurhey, north Manchester Kelly and Devon, both 15, scan the off-licence shelves. They decide on a bottle of Archers Schweppes Aqua Exotic Passion Cocktail. At five per cent proof alcohol, it offers a fairly hefty kick. And it's cheap. They take it up to the counter, hand over the money, and head for the door with their bagged goodies. No problem, despite the 'No ID, No Sale' sticker on the drinks fridge.

After the girls have left the shop, another customer presents herself at the counter. She's Louise Jeffries, 22, a trainee trading standards officer with Manchester City Council. Showing her credentials, she informs the bewildered-looking man behind the counter that he has just sold alcohol to two underage girls. By now Jeffries' colleague Ellie Green, 23, has also entered the shop, followed by two plain-clothes police officers. When doing what they call 'test purchase' operations to identify sellers of alcohol to minors, it's important for the trading standards team to have police back-up – especially in an area of inner-city Manchester as troubled as Harpurhey.

Councils have been empowered to enact such sting operations since the passing of the Criminal Justice & Police Act 2001. They were a key component of the Home Office's nationwide Alcohol Misuse and Enforcement Campaign which ran through the summer: of 1,825 'targeted establishments', 32 per cent of off-licences were identified

as selling alcohol to under-18s. Transgressors can end up with a formal caution or a £5,000 fine.

This is Kelly and Devon's fourth test purchase evening. 'It's something to do on a Friday night,' says Kelly. 'And you get a certificate for your record of achievement [at school],' says Devon. The first time they did it they were 'dead worried'. The council recruits undercover underagers from among the children of employees and schools. Some children, Jeffries says, are too shy or over-confident. Kelly and Devon get it just right.

There are strict guidelines: the girls can't be too tall, not made-up, not dressed up. They can't be older than 15. They aren't paid, but they get their dinner. If challenged by a shop-owner, they must tell the truth as to their real age. 'It's a fair test,' say the trading standards team. 'It's not entrapment.'

Tonight's hit-list of half a dozen off-licences is in part centred on establishments about which the police have had 'multiple complaints' from local residents. It's bitterly cold this Friday evening, but the streets are dotted with clumps of be-hooded teenagers with nowhere to go. We cruise around in two unmarked cars – the police vehicle generating waves of greeting from some of the savvy local youth – and make several sweeps past a notorious off-licence on an estate. Every other shop and house on the street is boarded up and derelict. There's a gang of teens gathered round the front door of the off-licence, many drinking alcohol. Kelly and Devon don't want to go in. 'I don't blame them,' Pe Jim Roberts says to his colleague Pe Theresa Bowers. 'I wouldn't want to go in.'

Three of the six off-licences sell alcohol – Archers, Lambrini, WKD Original Vodka Blue – to the girls. All will be formally interviewed by



SOS Bus volunteers take a girl's blood pressure; the bendy SOS Bus on its rounds



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multi-agency, 10-year, multi-million-pound programme aimed at rejuvenating this deprived inner-city area. A leisure centre is being built opposite the police station, and a new sixth-form college will hopefully encourage young people to stay in the area rather than decant out to colleges on the city's south side. 'If we can keep the children here, we can improve the stock as opposed to having this run-down economy.' With so much pro-active policing and development activities, officials are still smarting at Harpurhey being designated most deprived area in Britain by John Prescott's office this year. Operation Briard launched in October and

runs until the new year. Every Friday and Saturday night Orr's officers go out on patrol on foot, on bicycles and in vehicles. They confiscate all drink from under-18s and disperse groups. Youth intervention officers and an 'audited paper trail' allow for the careful scrutiny of children served with written warnings. There is an alcohol restriction zone, an area of the sprawling estates where no alcohol is allowed in public. 'We're changing the ethos of the area,' says Insp Orr. His aim is to 'educate and challenge' local youth.

Next week, the Government launches a national 'Christmas alcohol blitz' with the same focus, while spot-fines for misuse of alcohol by under-18s have recently been doubled at the request of the police. 'If we are to achieve a long-term change in the culture it is vital to tackle underage drinking,' says Hazel Blears, a Home Office Minister. 'We have extended the scope of fixed penalty notices to cover the sale, purchase and consumption of alcohol to young people. This will provide the police with extra tools to respond immediately to this problem and I hope they will be used in the coming months to send a clear message that sales of alcohol to under-18s will not be tolerated.'

In north Manchester this Friday there is also a 'Section 60' in operation. These temporary, locale-specific powers allow officers to stop and search individuals with no grounds for suspicion. They can remove headgear – useful when everyone wears hoodies – and Insp Orr is set on 'breaking the anonymity of the area, draconian powers, but the police say necessary in an area where games of cat and mouse are played out among dimly-lit alleyways and wasteland. And the children learn fast. Pe Roberts reports that the previous Friday, Briard officers didn't spot too much open boozing. But a suspiciously high number of children were drinking Fanta, Sprite and Coke.

At 10.30pm Pe Andy Naismith, 33, a gung-ho Glaswegian and former soldier, and Pe Mark Wells, 30, built like a rugby

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player and the officer who compiled the detailed application necessary for the Section 60, head out on patrol in their unmarked car. They head for Collyhurst Village, an estate that is a favourite destination for the 'firing' of stolen cars.

Up a cul-de-sac, on a patch of rubbish-strewn ground, there's a small blaze. Naismith and Wells stride up, torches flashing. There are six teenagers sitting on a log, trying to warm themselves. The oldest is 19, the youngest 11. 'What are you doing out at 11 at night?' Wells asks the latter. A shrug. The teens are blithely unconcerned at the hassle, even when Wells finds a full bottle of brandy stashed behind them. Three more adolescents meander out of the gloom to see what the excitement is.

The boys are asked to remove their outer tops, gloves and headgear. They want to know why. 'Because we can and we've got a Section 60,' says Wells. Two fire engines turn up to put out the fire. Naismith radios control with everyone's names and addresses. A check reveals that one of them, 15-year-old Gemma, has an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO). She isn't meant to be out this late, nor in the company of more than three people. Her pals, who seem very au fait with ASBOs, protest that it hasn't come into force yet. After a quick conferral, the officers decide it would be in nobody's interests to lock her up for the night. Anyway, she wasn't cheeky. Trilled by a gaggle of kids, they escort her home to her stepdad. He looks none too pleased.

It is getting on for midnight and Wells and Naismith head back to the station for their dinner. On the way they point out the sights: a 17-year-old on bail for rape; the wall that used to have a CCTV camera before some lads chopped it off; the Village Park, where cars were torched until the council placed large boulders at the entrance; a group of lads, melting into the shadows. It's a quiet night.

Over on the other side of Rochdale Road is another estate, the Vines. 'Since we've been doing this,' says Naismith of their anti-alcohol drive, 'the kids go over there to do their drinking.'