



Hangover: More Tragedy Than Comedy

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Last weekend, we all heard the word “Hangover” like never before, owing to the debut of another installment of a film franchise by that name. Hollywood’s latest, but sadly not last, saga of male misbehavior seeks once again to plumb the depths of a bottomless pit. Try as they might, movie makers can’t seem to hit bottom in that sink hole.

Understand, my sour mood here has nothing to do with this film’s merits, or lack thereof. Instead, the general public’s misperception about hangover in general and alcohol abuse particularly, deeply disturbs me. As a safety and health conscious employer, it should bother you even more.



Look at it this way. I performed an Internet search using the word “Hangover”, finding 62,000,000 hits. Narrowing the search to “Hangover Cures” I found a “mere” 7,520,000. Sadly, searching for the heart of the matter, “Hangover Health Risks” produced only 1,410 citations.

It seems the word “Hangover” universally brings chuckles and sneers, not concern or care. Condescending comments follow, not compassion. It brings to mind foggy-headed fraternities, stuporous stadiums and campy deer camps. At most, boozing fraternity brothers might, in moments of sobriety and headache, concede that a hangover is “just the price you pay for having a good time.”

But, why doesn’t “Hangover” make us think of dodging bullets in the forms of traffic near-misses, stumbles and falls, embarrassment, humiliation, saying things that would have been “better left unsaid,” and torn relationships? Grieving parents, damaged childhoods, job loss, brushes with the law, even disability and death can also be “the price you pay for having a good time.”

You may call me a buzz kill. Or you may call me a prophet. Either way I call this reality, and we just have to deal with it. Here are REAL medical accompaniments of hangovers:

- Increased risk of accident and injury when intoxicated AND while hung-over, INCLUDING at work the day after a binge.
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure for one to two days after a drinking binge, increasing the risk of eventual sustained high blood pressure.
- Toxic effects on heart muscle from alcohol, causing rhythm disturbances, most commonly atrial fibrillation, especially following binges. Emergency physicians know the “holiday heart syndrome” well, in which atrial fibrillation develops in patients with hangovers. Binges also increase the chance of cardiomyopathy.
- Increased risk of developing fatty liver, with risk of cirrhosis eventually.
- Increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted disease, including HIV, Hepatitis B and C.
- Impaired productivity at work including increased absenteeism and lost productive time while at work (presenteeism).

Employers who care about health, safety, and productivity are like salmon swimming up stream. You try to lead your workforce in the right direction, against our culture’s strong current that flows the wrong way: downhill. It is okay to laugh at movies like this, to chuckle at hangover jokes, and to shake your head at absurd home remedies. But all the while, you need tools to push your culture up hill. Please see previous postings from Occ Doc in a Box about binge drinking (12/1/2009) and safe use of prescription pain medications (12/6/2010) to find help.

Now that I have posted this article, I should find at least 1,411 hits the next time I search “Hangover Health Risks.” That closes the lead held by “Hangover Cures” to just over 7.5 million.

I think we have a lot of work ahead.