



Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet

Alcohol and Other Drugs
Knowledge Centre



Kava in Australia

Presenter: Dr Julia Butt
National Drug Research Institute

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Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land we are standing on today, the Whadjuk Noongar people, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

Kava

Kava use among Aboriginal Australians – Understanding the evidence

Julia Butt

Senior Research Fellow

National Drug Research Institute, Curtin
University



Overview

- What is kava
- Who uses kava
- What are the effects of kava on health
- Kava in Australia
 - What can the research even tell us...
 - Where is it used
 - Effects of kava on health
 - Effects of kava on community
- Kava policy

What is kava

- *A plant, a root, drink*
- *Piper Methysticum Forst F – pepper plant – grows in tropical Pacific countries*



What is kava

- Drink is an infusion of kava root and water (or coconut milk)
- Non-fermented



What is Kava

- What it feels like:
 - Sociability
 - Peace
 - Positive mood
 - Reduced anxiety
 - Relaxation

- Increased intoxication:
 - Sleepiness – leading to deep sleep
 - Muscle weakness
 - Ataxia
 - Sense of unreality and fatigue
 - Dilated pupils
 - Numb mouth



What is Kava

- Psychoactive properties due to kava lactones (kavapyrones)
- Absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract
- Kava has a dose dependent effect on the CNS
- Kava lactone extracts are being used increasingly in Western natural medicine as a treatment for anxiety, depression and insomnia.

Who Uses kava

- Pacific Islands: Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia
 - Ceremonially, socially, medicinally
 - General increase in the frequency and quantity of use
- Pacific diaspora
- Some Arnhem Land communities in the Northern Territory, Australia
- Other populations internationally

Why is Kava Use an Issue in Australia?

- Manage the competing needs of different populations in Australia
 - Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land
 - Australians with Pacific heritage
 - Consumers of natural medicine
 - Economies of Australia's Pacific neighbours

Health Effects of Kava Use



- Challenging area of research
- Methodological rigour
- Lack of recent Australian data
- Small complex populations
- Some evidence for benefits

Is Kava Harmful to Health

- United Nations (FAO - 2016, WHO - 2007) – Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (2005)
 - The overall potential for harm from **moderate** kava use is low
 - Doesn't mean no potential for harm
 - Doesn't mean heavy use is low harm



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Is Kava Use Harmful to Health?

- Short term potential for harm
 - Driving
 - Accidents
 - Nausea
 - Eye discomfort
 - Toxicity is considered low



Is Kava Use Harmful to Health

- Kava dermopathy
- Liver functioning
- Low body weight
- Poor health
- Low motivation
- Cognitive function
- Seizures

Is Kava Use Harmful to Health?

- Systematic Review (Rychetnik and Madronio, 2011)
 - Causality indicated
 - Kava dermatopathy
 - Raised liver enzymes (GGT)
 - Nausea
 - Weight loss / Low body weight
 - Association indicated
 - Red eyes
 - Poor health
 - Impotence
 - Raised cholesterol
 - Low motivation
 - Association hypothesis
 - Fits, seizures
 - Melioidosis
 - Ischemic Heart Disease

Is Kava Use Harmful to Health

- Kava dependence?
- Drug interactions
- Risks associated with practices:
 - Production
 - Sale
 - Consumption

Is Kava Use Harmful to Health

- Moderate use put people at a low risk for harm.
- There is insufficient evidence to define moderate or heavy kava use.
- There is insufficient evidence regarding the health effects of heavy kava use.

Drink in Moderation!

What is moderation?

- No more than 3-5 (mid-tide) bowls per occasion
- At least 2 Kava free nights per week



If suffering from Kava related symptoms such as kanikani and eye irritations avoid kava for at least one week

Fijian Ministry of Health and Medical Services

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- In Australia kava is used in all states and territories.
- Concerns about kava use are limited to communities in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.
- Kava use is not of concern for other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Kava is used in around 8 Arnhem Land Communities and has been since 1982.
- Kava was introduced in the context of social change.
 - Kava was introduced as an alcohol control measure “Fellowship without the harms”
 - Kava use was ‘encouraged’; considered safe and socially acceptable

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Understanding the research
 - Regulation
 - Challenges of research in small communities
 - Research before 2007
 - Research since 2007...

Kava Policy Milestones

- 1982 -1990 – Unregulated
- 1990 – 1993 – Kava Licensing
- 1993 – 1998 – Regulatory hiatus
- 2002 – 2007 – Second kava licensing period
- 2007 – current – Kava import restriction
- 2019 announcement

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Understanding the research
 - Regulation
 - Challenges of research in small communities
 - Research before 2007
 - Research since 2007...

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Extent and pattern of kava use
 - In kava using communities **until 2002** there was an increasing number of people who drank kava and increasing quantities of kava consumed per person.
 - In kava using communities: typically half of all males were using and using at levels consistent with harm.
 - More prevalent among males over 30.
 - High volumes, long duration

Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Kava use does not occur in isolation
 - Alcohol
 - Cannabis
 - Other drugs
- Current extent of kava use
 - Black market activity
 - Anecdotal evidence

Effects of Kava use in Arnhem Land

- No systematic evidence for the positive effects
 - Reduction in alcohol consumption and related harms
 - Increased fellowship
- Anecdotal report cannot be ignored
 - Beliefs about alcohol and kava
 - Keeping people in community

Effects of Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Health – prior to 2002
 - Kava dermopathy (45% - Clough; 60 - 70% of heavy drinkers - Mathews)
 - Elevated liver enzymes (61% people who use Clough)
 - Poor overall health (39% heavy drinkers, Mathews)
 - Low BMI (32% people who use, Clough)
 - Redness of eyes
 - Poor motivation

Effects of Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Health
 - Immune functioning
 - Seizures
 - Cardio vascular health
- Understanding health effects
- Recent information - anecdotal

Effects of Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Social
 - Economic impacts
 - Time out-of-role
 - Culture
 - Health, nutrition, hygiene
 - Care for children
 - Family
 - Community participation
 - Workforce participation

Effects of Kava use in Arnhem Land

- Community
 - (Health effects + Social effects) x prevalence
 - Declines in community activities, cultural activities, community cleanliness
 - Cash drains
 - Clough: More than half males, 20-40% females and 20% available cash then community function is impacted.

Managing Harms

- Health promotion
- Health screening
- Alcohol and other drug workforce – poorly resourced
- Lack of evidence
- What to do in absence of evidence
 - Best practise in AOD
 - Recognise individual risk factors
 - Recognising the social determinants of health

Kava Regulation

- Supply reduction measures...



Kava Policy Milestones

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Kava Regulation

- 1982 -1990 – Unregulated
 - Rapid expansion
 - Emergence of a black market
 - Communities did use their own strategies to minimise harm
 - WA - ban
- 1990 – 1993 – Kava Licensing
 - Response to emerging harms (goal was to reduce consumption, responsible sale of kava)
 - Community ownership
 - Possession not illegal – black market continued to grow
 - Evaluated

Kava Regulation

- 1993 – 1998 – Regulatory hiatus
 - Change in Food Standards act meant NT laws contravened Act – licensing ended
 - Licensed sale ceased
 - Not accompanied by resourcing for health nor policing
 - Black market flourished

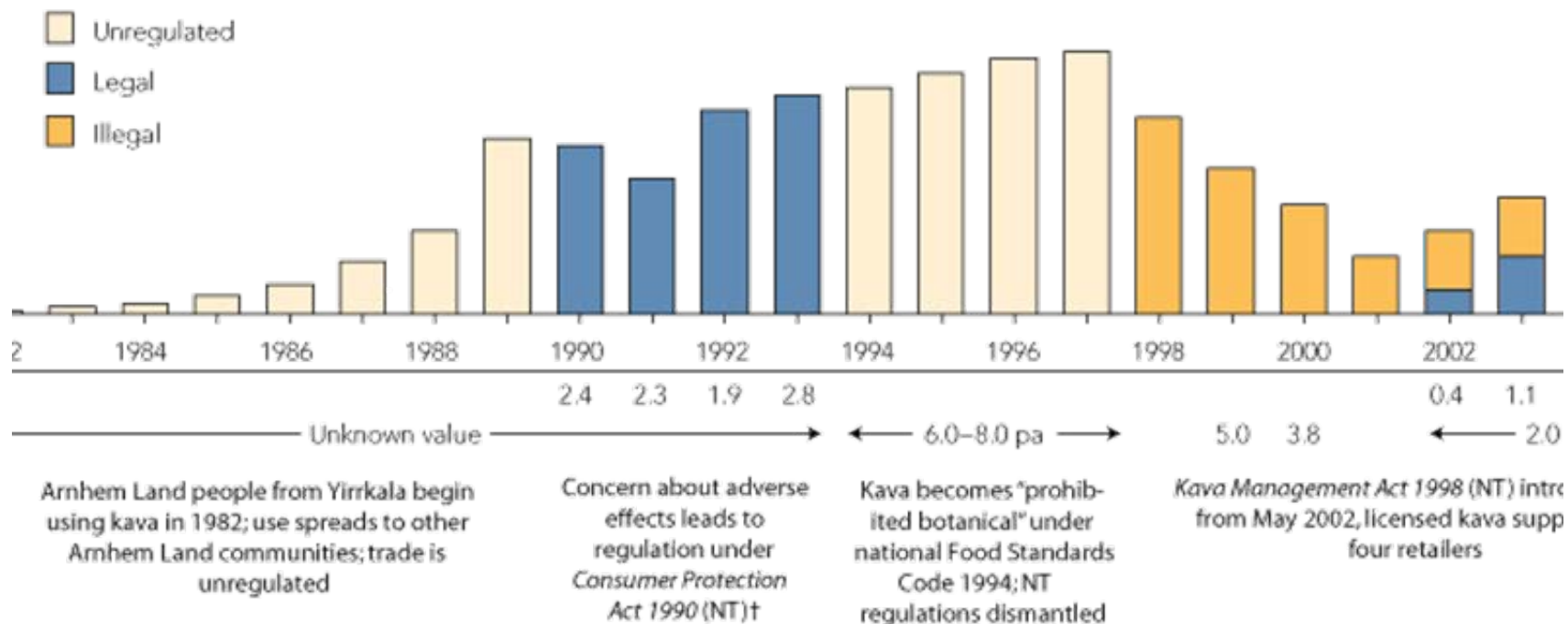
Kava Regulation

- 2002 – 2007 – Second kava licensing period
 - National Code of Kava management: Regulate use and to ensure provision for cultural use.
 - Licensing in NT: retail licenses in communities
 - Positives: cash remained in communities, health advisory group established
 - Negatives: Not evaluated... daily consumption limits not appropriate, under age drinking, persistent black market, reliance on income.

Kava Regulation

- 2007 – current – Kava import restriction
 - Health minister Abbot announced restrictions on the importation of kava.
 - Allowed incoming passengers up to 2KG kava
 - Timing consistent with the NTER and return to paternalistic policy
 - Announcement was not made in consultation, communities not prepared
 - Limited anecdotal evidence suggests a decrease in kava related harm
- 2019 announcement
 - Scott Morrison announced potential increase to importation restriction
 - Community consultation has been sought...

Implications of Policy



Clough et al., 2006

Implications of Policy

- Only licensing included community consultation, clear objectives and mechanisms to monitor objectives. Both periods were terminated prior to adjustments being made.
- Policy changes were not coordinated supported by increases to health or policing services.
- Lack of evaluation is worthy of note.
- Policy implementation is an area which can cause harm.

Recognising what we know and what we don't know

- We do know
 - Moderate kava use is low risk.
 - Kava use can cause individual and community level harms when use is heavy.
 - Kava use is part of the picture. It is not the only picture.
 - Communities need to be supported to address kava (and other drug) related harm
 - Community consultation is required to develop and implement policy.

Recognising what we know and what we don't know

- We don't know
 - Prevalence
 - Clearly what harms are. What the mechanisms are for some harms.
 - Characteristics of kava use dependence.
 - Relationship with alcohol related harm (or other drugs).

Future Directions

- Need for research across cultures as well as within.
 - Kava dependence
 - Safe levels of consumption
 - Impacts of chronic heavy consumption
 - Prevalence

Future Directions

- Collaborative development and implementation of policy
- Action and resourcing to prevent black market
- Action and resourcing to support health and wellbeing specific to kava
- A clearer focus on the social determinants of health

National Drug Research Institute

Preventing Harmful Drug Use in Australia

Dr Julia Butt
Senior Research Fellow, NDRI

julia.butt@curtin.edu.au



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Thank you!

Dr Julia Butt (NDRI)

Email: julia.butt@curtin.edu.au

Millie (HealthInfoNet)

Ph: (08) 9370 6358

Email: m.harford-mills@ecu.edu.au

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