

Press release from Jan de Beer, cell 082 456 3677

SAPMA CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION AGAINST METHANOL AS COSTA RICAN DEATH TOLL MOUNTS

By mid-August this year 26 people in Costa Rica had already died in just a few weeks after consuming alcohol tainted with harmful levels of methanol – another reason why the SA government should urgently investigate the supply and use of methanol in products sold to the public, says Deryck Spence, executive director of the SA Paint Manufacturing Associations (SAPMA).

The Costa Rican Ministry of Health has confirmed that the 19 male fatalities and seven women who died lived in various cities in Costa Rica and has confiscated about 30 000 containers of alcohol labelled as Guaro Montano, Guaro Gran Apache, Star Welsh and Aguardiente Molotov, after identifying toxic levels of methanol in these spirits sold over the counter at bottle stores. It has advised all Costa Ricans to avoid consuming these alcoholic beverages until further investigations are completed and the sources of counterfeit products found.

While Costa Rica is now making headlines, in recent years there have been numerous outbreaks related to tainted alcohol in Cambodia, Czech Republic and Ecuador, to name only a few countries. Some outbreaks have affected as many as 800 victims with mortality rates greater than 30% according to the World Health Organisation. In India, 154 people died and over 200 were hospitalised this year alone after drinking unregulated “moonshine” which has also happened in several First World Countries. The practice in Bali of spiking drinks, usually the local arak spirit, with methanol is blamed for several recent deaths and serious injuries to tourists and locals.

Methanol poisoning typically occurs due to the consumption of “adulterated counterfeit or informally produced spirit drinks,” according to the World Health Organisation but SAPMA is also concerned that children could accidentally drink a garage-stored DIY product such as lacquer thinners which sometimes contains up to 32% methanol.

“The use of methanol in thinners is favoured by some producers because it is cheaper than safer alternatives. Although methanol has been placed on the Hazardous Substances list as a Category 1 hazardous substance and a Strategic Environmental Assessment study on the matter has been conducted, the Department of Health has still not officially implemented legislation,” Spence states.

He says SAPMA believes there could well have been many fatalities in SA already due to the drinking of methanol which has gone undetected as the medical profession would not necessarily be on the lookout for such an unnatural cause of death particularly among impoverished alcoholics in disadvantaged communities.

Australia’s ABC News in a recent report drew attention to the dangers of methanol poisoning pointing out that the symptoms do not appear immediately after alcohol consumption.

“Methanol poisoning symptoms take a while to surface. The consumed methanol must be metabolised, and toxic levels of formic acid must accumulate in the body. In the first few hours, a person will experience drowsiness, feel unsteady and disinhibited. Eventually these symptoms will escalate into a headache, vomiting, abdominal pain and vertigo. Patients may also hyperventilate or feel out of breath, and even experience convulsions, and permanent visual impairment. Most victims seek medical care only after a significant delay which contributes to the high level of morbidity and mortality,” ABC News pointed out.

The delays could also be caused by alcoholics passing out and sleeping for hours after consuming potentially fatal doses of methanol.

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