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Hospitalisations spike as booze bill hits hard

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THE Territory's two biggest emergency departments are experiencing near-record demand from grog-related trauma as alcohol abuse leaves taxpayers footing a bill in the hundreds of millions each year, the *NT News* can reveal.

Health Department figures show Royal Darwin and Alice Springs hospitals had their second-highest number of alcohol-related ED presentations since 2009 last year, while RDH had its highest number of grog-induced hospitalisations in a decade.

People's Alcohol Action Coalition spokesman John Boffa said the figures were reflected in the evidence on the ground in Alice Springs and called on the government to release the figures for the first quarter of 2018.

"On one particular morning last (month) about 20 heavily intoxicated people were in the ED," he said.

"On this same morning there were two people in intensive care with life-threatening stab wounds. This is on top of a tragic and apparently alcohol-related suicide in the same week."

Dr Boffa said the rise in alcohol-related injuries, which he partly blamed on the lack of point-of-sale interventions at bottles, meant the town was in danger of regaining its reputation as "the stabbing capital of the world".

"We have regressed very rapidly as a result of the change in (POSI) policy and practice," he said.

The Government has pledged to employ 75 police auxiliaries to perform POSI duties, including in Alice Springs, which Health Minister Natasha Fyles said formed part of "the most comprehensive plan to tackle alcohol abuse in the Territory's history".

"These figures show that alcohol-related harm continues



Alcohol harm-minimisation researcher and Father Frank Flynn Fellow at the Menzies School of Health Research, Professor James Smith
Picture: Justin Kennedy

to be the Territory's No.1 social issue," she said.

"The social and financial costs are significant, with many hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars a year spent addressing the injury and illness caused by alcohol abuse.

"Territorians deserve access to high (quality) services and we can't continue to see resources diverted to deal with alcohol-fuelled crime and violence – not just in our hospitals but with other frontline emergency services."

Menzies School of Health Research alcohol harm-minimisation expert James Smith said it could take years before government policy was reflected in hospital data.

But Prof Smith said the current commitment to long-term

reform from both sides of politics represented "a watershed moment for the NT".

"It's created a huge policy window to think really differently around alcohol consumption and use in the Northern Territory," he said.