

THE ORANGE GROVE

A new answer on binge drinking

Lower legal drinking age reduces rationale to drink hard and fast.



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es?"

Me: "Dr. Phil, you've heard about the 'war on drugs'; there needs to be a war on binge drinking."

Dr. Phil: "What should we be doing about it?"

Me: "One thing we should not do is reduce the minimum drinking age from 21 to 18. That would be a mistake. Studies have shown that since most states increased the minimum drinking age from 18 to 21 in the late 1970s and early 80s, 25,000 lives have been saved."

To my embarrassment, my answers to those questions, heard by millions of Dr. Phil fans, turned out to be wrong.

To explain, let me backtrack a few days before I appeared on Dr. Phil's show. It all began with a call from my assistant, Dorothy Farol.

Dorothy: "President Doti, will you take a call from Dr. Phil?"

Me: "Who is Dr. Phil?"

Dorothy: "He hosts a TV show watched by millions of people."

Me: "Millions of people? Then, of course, put him through."

When I recently appeared on the "Dr. Phil" show, he asked me the following questions:

Dr. Phil: "Dr. Doti, is binge drinking a major problem on college campuses?"

Dr. Phil asked me to be on his show to comment on the Amethyst Initiative – an initiative signed by 134 college presidents across the country that recommends we give consideration to reducing the minimum drinking age from 21 to 18.

At first blush, it may sound strange that so many college presidents actually signed a petition that calls for making it easier for their students to drink alcohol. But their basic rationale was that by lowering the age, there wouldn't be this urge on the part of young people to binge drink whenever and wherever they have a chance. Making drinking legal, they reasoned, would lead to more responsible drinking.

There's something to be said for that. I liked the idea. Colleges offer environments that lend themselves to teachable moments – in this case, opportunities to learn how to drink in a responsible manner.

But if it's a law that you can't drink, that's it. You can't drink. There are no teachable moments. You have to follow the law. End of story. So the 134 presidents had a good point: Change the law.

Now, as much as I liked on the surface the idea of reducing the drinking age, I needed to analyze and review the data before shooting off my mouth, especially on national television. So I set aside everything I was doing and studied the issue.

My research, however, didn't lead me down that path I had hoped. Despite my liking the

Amethyst Initiative in theory, it appeared to be pretty conclusive in all the studies I analyzed that in the 25 years or so that states increased the minimum drinking age to 21, the number of traffic fatalities did indeed drop sharply. And that explains why I argued against lowering the minimum drinking age on the "Dr. Phil" show.

After the show, they drove me home in a limo. They even gave me chocolate chip cookies. I love chocolate chip cookies. I should have been happy. I was a big TV star and those cookies – well, they were really good. But when I got back home, I had this funny feeling in the pit of my stomach that the message I gave on the show was wrong.

So I started looking at more data and more data. And then I found it – a study showing that Canada experienced almost exactly the same drop in the alcohol-related fatality rate by year as that experienced in the U.S. But Canada never increased the drinking age to 21. For most of Canada, it was still 18. That means it wasn't the increase in the minimum drinking age that led to the drop in the death rate. It must have been something else.

So I let Dr. Phil down. I misled millions of people on his show. But now that he's on to new subject material, like Octomom, I doubt he or his audience is still interested in binge drinking. I am, though, and that's why there aren't 134 presidents' signatures on the Amethyst Initiative. Now there are 135.