

# Plenty of BOTTLE

**Four months into her new role, Srabani Sen is getting her feet under the table as chief executive of Alcohol Concern. DDN found her quite at home with the idea of upping the ante on alcohol issues.**

up from scratch the charity's public affairs function. Working with these organisations has given her a useful reference point for engaging professionals across different sectors.

Coming from another sector herself, has also given her objectivity in her new job. "When you come to an organisation for the first time, you end up asking the "why" question quite a lot – "why do we do things the way we do?". I think this can be quite valuable, because one of the jobs of a national agency like Alcohol Concern is to step back, look at the big picture, and ask "what's the vision? What should we be aiming for?"

While it's a 'fantastic time to join' Alcohol Concern, Sen has settled in enough to be concerned that the government's agenda on

alcohol is driven by crime and disorder.

'There seems to be a sense that if alcohol hurts other people, such as a 20-year-old getting involved in a fight on a Saturday night, then that matters. But if alcohol affects the individual, it doesn't matter so much.'

Putting the health aspects back on the map became an early priority, and a chance to improve the public's understanding of the impact of binge drinking.

'There isn't really an understanding of how binge drinking impacts on a massive range of people's lives,' says Sen, who is optimistic that Alcohol Concern is uniquely placed to make a difference. It is, she says, the only alcohol policy organisation that embraces all the agendas on which alcohol impacts.

**T**wo things really attracted me to the job at Alcohol Concern,' says Srabani Sen, the agency's chief executive since last November. 'I could see that the organisation was very high profile, very energetic, a good place to be.

'But also, importantly, I felt that alcohol issues were ready to fly. There were the beginnings of a recognition of the impact of alcohol and what alcohol was about. It just looked like an area that was ripe for success.'

At her office in Southwark, London, Sen exudes enthusiasm. She is constantly prioritising her 'to do' list as she talks, and is ambitious for the next phase of Alcohol Concern. But alongside her optimism, she keeps reminding herself that she has much to learn.

The first four months in post have been very much a listening phase, she says, 'finding out what people think about real issues and trying to get a sense of what the key priorities are'. Over the last six weeks, she has been visiting centres, 'getting to really understand the issues on the ground'. She has been struck by the commitment of those working in the field: 'It's clearly an area where there are people willing to make a difference,' she says. 'To be surrounded by that degree of passion is just fantastic.'

Sen's immediate background was as head of communications, then acting director of nations, regions and campaigning at Diabetes UK, where she worked for five years. Before that, she was public affairs manager at the Chartered Institute of Housing, where she set



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'We need to start shifting the balance of where people's attention is. It's not just about government departments – we also need to reach out to bodies responsible for areas of social policy, and demonstrate to them that tackling alcohol is actually to the benefit of their stakeholders as well.'

Sen is obviously well experienced in communicating with policy-makers, and can make her point eloquently. But how will she make sure that Alcohol Concern's messages reach those who need them – the one in three men, and one in five women who drink too much?

The focus should be on putting out simple messages, because they haven't got through yet, she says. 'You need to have somebody voicing these very simple messages, articulating them, powerfully and regularly. You don't just say something once and it enters consciousness. You say something again and again, until finally people wake up. It's about the long game.'

It takes a lot of courage to be that simple, to say things in a simple way, she reflects. 'Because in a way, it's easier to be complicated, you can hide behind complexity of messages. You can't hide behind a simple message. It is what it is. It says what it says.'

The simple message is that alcohol is a drug which has the potential to kill people, says Sen. The second part of the message is not about saying that nobody should drink, ever again, she adds. 'It's about people having the knowledge to make an informed choice about their drinking.'

A crucial element to getting heard, and the only way to begin to communicate to someone how alcohol affects them, she says, is to identify who it is you're trying to get the message to, and what it is that gets their engine running.

Not taking time to consider this step is an easy trap to fall into, she explains. 'You can sit there and say "levels of liver cirrhosis have grown over the last 20 years, alcohol can cause cancer and heart disease and high blood pressure, and blah blah blah... but an 18-year-old down the pub with their mates doesn't care that 20 years down the line, they might end up with liver cirrhosis. You need to understand that an 18-year-old lad is going to be far more concerned about brewer's droop.'

Similarly, the debate about whether you talk about units, and how much a unit equals, can become 'almost a subsidiary issue'. The only way to motivate people to do anything, is to think about their own drinking, and their own patterns of behaviour. It's back to Sen's simple, very clear messages.

While simple messages are Sen's chosen weapon of combat, she is keen to point out that she is fully aware of the might of the enemy. The alcohol industry not only has money to create messages in every facet of modern culture; it also has 'very very sophisticated marketing people, who understand how to position and

market drink, to make it sell the most'.

Tens of billions of pounds are pumped into maintaining the level of interest in alcohol, and into making sure that health warnings are kept 'lame and watery, and without substance', she says. 'And that's something I think we do need to challenge – something that Alcohol Concern is in a position to challenge.'

Alcohol appears on the television screen every six or seven minutes, she points out. The message has become part of life's backdrop: drinking is normal, it's an everyday part of life, it has no negative consequences. From the subtle visual references (alcohol in the backdrop of a tv drama) to the crass (Friday night tv's 'slightly sozzled celebrity' slot on the 'hideous programme, Friday Night Project, where they feed a micro celebrity huge amounts of alcohol and get them to describe something that the studio audience have to guess'), the prevailing culture is of drink equalling a good time.

Put like that, it seems an uphill struggle for a physically small organisation like Alcohol Concern to put out the message that actually, alcohol can be damaging to you, and you need to drink safely. But Sen insists that she is excited about the challenge of making their voice heard, and can see 'the beginnings of an understanding of the impact of drinking'. The government's concentration on crime and disorder is 'an opportunity to wedge our way into the debate,' she insists. 'And once we're wedged in, it's about pushing open that gap and bringing through the other side of the picture.'

Confident as she is, she doesn't pretend to have all the answers. But she is willing to think outside traditional stereotypes and speaks out against the tendency to compartmentalise.

'We tend to say either you're a young binge drinker – or you're a chronic drinker, a homeless person drinking white lightning. But there's a complete section of people, the hidden drinkers, who go home and drink a bottle of wine a night, and think that's OK. Having that simple message about the impact of drinking is really important.'

Early intervention is a key motivation, and Sen sees it as crucial for Alcohol Concern to engage with professionals in different sectors, 'so we can spot the people who are potentially having problems with their drinking, but not recognising that'. This might be their GP, a nurse in the surgery, somebody who sees them as they walk in the door of A&E, their social housing provider who spots problems in keeping up rent payments, or their social worker dealing with an issue with their family. 'It's about gearing up all these people to recognise that there's a problem in the first place, and to know what to do with it.'

Sen is equally keen to gear up government – to support drug action teams to incorporate alcohol and become DAATs, and to light the policy fuse following the 'painfully slow' alcohol strategy.

'Where we've made progress, it's not been



Alcohol Concern has recently publicised two web-based initiatives to get the safe drinking message across. The 'How's Your Drink' site at [www.howsyourdrink.org.uk](http://www.howsyourdrink.org.uk) gives a short, interactive test, to help you decide if you're drinking too much, and offers tips for cutting down. The project shows the positive face of working with the drinks industry: drinks company Diageo gave financial support to Alcohol Concern, to develop the site. Srabani Sen says that 14,000 people did the test in the first week of its launch, in January. If you seem to have a more serious drink problem, you're directed to 'Down Your Drink' at [www.downyourdrink.org.uk](http://www.downyourdrink.org.uk) for a six-week online programme to become a 'thinker drinker' and develop safer drinking habits.

as powerful as we would have wanted it to be,' she says. 'Some targets have been met, but we're sitting behind on other things. In that sense, the game's only just begun; we've got to actually find ways of using the Public Health White Paper and strategy on drinking responsibly. We're really only at the start of the process of getting alcohol to matter.'

Sen describes Alcohol Concern as the national voice for alcohol, and obviously has no intention of letting it pipe down. 'We're about campaigning to keep issues up the agenda,' she says. 'We're a noise-maker. That's our job.'