

## A Drink to Die for: Methanol Poisoning in Indonesia

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### Dear Editor,

I would like to draw the reader's attention to the problem of methanol poisoning which is affecting tourists who are traveling to the Islands of Indonesia; Bali, Lombok and Gili Islands in particular.

I first learned about this problem six years ago when the daughter of my work colleague embarked on the trip of a lifetime after completing her university studies. I was the one who took care of Rachel's necessary vaccinations to ensure a safe trip. It never crossed my mind that Rachel would become the victim of a methanol poisoning outbreak on the island of Gili Trawangan, May 30<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Rachel's dad had this to say "Initially we thought this was a once off tragedy and local authorities did nothing to dispel that idea. However we now know that this is a regular occurrence and is still continuing to happen. I would like to highlight this problem in order to save others from this major threat." It is clear that tourists to the Indonesian islands need to be better educated of the serious health risks associated with consuming alcoholic beverages and locally brewed spirits such as 'Arak'.

In March 2010, Rachel's parents began to realize the extent of the problem. They began to track reports of Methanol poisoning in Indonesia and were astounded by the scale of the problem. In April 2010, 22 people died by drinking contaminated alcohol. May 2010, saw the death of 8 people more victims of Arak poisoning. Statistics released on <https://www.gov.uk/suggest> that 280 people have died from methanol poisoning since 2011 and many more have been hospitalized from drinking counterfeit alcohol. People of all nationalities and professions are becoming victims of methanol poisoning or, what is known now as 'Arak Attack' which is why we need to educate people on the risks of consuming spirits and generate awareness.

It seems that local brewers do not have access to the same brewing technologies as larger alcohol manufacturing companies. The problem is that local brewers produce spirits at home and therefore it is almost impossible to ensure that the methanol has been separated from the ethanol in the correct way. When ingested, methanol is highly toxic to the body causing abdominal stomach aches, headaches, and blurred vision. This may lead to permanent blindness or can be fatal if the poisoning is not treated quickly. 'Arak' is an already potent alcoholic drink mostly brewed from coconut and very popular in Indonesia

given that it is a much cheaper alternative to imported spirits. The process of adding other substances to Arak in order to drastically increase its potency and reduce its cost has become frighteningly more common. It has varying high alcohol content, generally between 20 and 50%, making it the drink of choice among tourists. As a bottle of vodka is equal to one month's wages in Bali so it is brewed by locals who find it as a cheaper alternative to imported alcohol which is heavily taxed. The problem is that there no way for tourists to know what exactly they are putting into their bodies. Rachel's dad warns that "there is no discernible smell, taste or color. This is not a case of naïve tourists taking a risk for a cheap drink; the risk to life is real. There is no way of knowing if a drink is contaminated or not".

"Drinking in Bali and its surroundings is like playing Russian roulette. If something goes wrong, medical assistance is very limited or even non-existent as in Rachel's case. Followup by author ities is an ineffective cosmetic exercise." To this date Rachel's parents have received no result of the investigation into the Rachel's death. No criminal proceedings have taken place and nobody has been held responsible. These days, methanol poisoning is still a major threat to tourists. Friends and relatives of the victims are trying to raise awareness by bringing all of the information to one location. Anyone intending to travel to these areas should visit [www.facebook.com/ADrinkToDieFrom](http://www.facebook.com/ADrinkToDieFrom). It is advised that travelers to destinations such as Bali take extreme caution when delving into the nightlife of these areas. It is recommended for tourists to drink from well-known beers and sealed cap trusted spirits instead of locally brewed alcohol. The message seems to be that if the price of the drink seems too good to be true then it probably is.

An increased number of cases led to a travel warning to be placed on the website for the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs as well as the famous back-packing website Lonely Planet. However, this information would require someone to be actively searching for it. Rachel's parent endeavor to highlight this problem and inform people of the risks by any means necessary. "My family and I never thought we would live the rest of our lives without our treasured daughter. I will do my best to ensure no other parent or family has to experience the heart break we feel each minute of everyday". I would like to thank you for reading this and I hope that this piece will urge young tourists and backpackers to be more cautious while drinking alcohol abroad as this information may save their life or the life of another. It is still happening.

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