

Hangover Clinics Australia: Valid medical treatment or dangerous fad?

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Nicole Partridge investigates whether this is a viable idea or if it will simply encourage excessive drinking

Picture this: You've pulled an all-night bender fuelled by liquor and now you have to front up for work feeling well below par. On the way in to the office you stop off at a clinic, which hooks you up to a drip and, voila, no more hangover. For Sydneysiders, this scenario is now a reality – and the plan is for more clinics to set up around the country.

Former Sydney lawyer Max Petro has established the Hangover Clinic after observing the effects of intravenous (IV) remedies first-hand on the US ski fields – and the idea is copping some heavy-duty flak. "The idea came from watching qualified paramedic ski patrollers using IV infusion on themselves as a recovery method after a big night out – it was amazing," he says. The clinic is staffed by a team of doctors and provides patients with IV-fluid treatment to help them recover from dehydration due to a hangover. It also claims to relieve cold or flu, jetlag or sports fatigue symptoms – but it's the hangover remedy that's raising eyebrows.



The Experts Weigh In

"Rehydration – by IV infusion or otherwise – isn't a 'magic wand' cure for a hangover," Dr Saxon Smith, president of the Australian Medical Association (NSW), says.

Associate professor Adrian Dunlop, chief addiction specialist at the NSW Ministry of Health, agrees and says the claims made by the Hangover Clinic are misleading.

"There's no evidence that IV rehydration can cure hangovers, and there's a risk of harm," he says, explaining that the current theory is that a hangover and its symptoms – headache, dizziness, nausea – are an immune reaction, with dehydration being only part of the picture."

Other parts of that picture, as suggested by the US Government's Smithsonian Institution and backed by leading Australian researchers, is that a hangover is the build-up of the nasty toxin acetaldehyde, produced as the body metabolises alcohol. Evidence suggests that acetaldehyde is 10-30 times more toxic than alcohol and may be linked to diseases including throat, liver and breast cancer.

Big Business Worldwide

While the well-known risks of excessive drinking should be sobering enough, hydration clinics have become big business around the world.

Hangover Heaven in Las Vegas, set up in 2012, claims to have a 98 per cent success rate in relieving hangovers. Its director of operations, Dr Darien Cohen, says it's common to see up to 100 patients a day in any one of its locations, which include a luxury mobile coach, clients' hotel rooms or homes and a clinic near the city's famous party strip.

Meanwhile, the Hangover Club in New York operates a custom-fitted limo bus, offering IV infusions, hangover food and entertainment including optional screenings of the film *The Hangover*.

The Sydney clinic will be more low-key, Petro says. "When you arrive, you'll be given a medical questionnaire, then taken into the treatment area where a qualified doctor will insert a cannula into your vein, hooked up to an IV drip and bag filled with one litre of a hydrating infusion containing sodium chloride and vitamins.

"It's all designed to replenish and rehydrate the body and is far more effective than oral rehydration. All you need to do is recline in one of our plush lounges and relax for 30 minutes to one hour, depending on the package."

However, this comes at a price. The Jump Start package of IV hydration and infusion of vitamins B and C costs \$140. For \$200, you can get the Resurrection package, which also gives you five minutes of oxygen therapy and a boost of the antioxidant glutathione.

In response to this, Dunlop says: "Why would anyone choose to waste their money on this when they can rehydrate orally with water... and it's free?"

Demand and Doubts

Despite the controversy, Petro says that months of research with a panel of consulting doctors has shown his IV treatment to be effective. And it seems public demand may be there, with Petro claiming that more than 400 people have registered on the Hangover Clinic's website and more than 700 are following it on Facebook.

"We have people from all walks of life," he says. "There are the older women who say, 'It doesn't take me long to get a hangover after a couple of chardys,' and older guys telling us they can't drink like they used to. Then we have athletes who are keen to try the Sports Recovery package. Most people are saying, 'Where have you been all my life?'"

However, the NSW Government is concerned about the mixed messages the clinic sends, with both NSW Premier Mike Baird and Labor health spokesman Walt Secord saying they fear it will encourage binge drinking.

John Scott, CEO of DrinkWise Australia, agrees that it tells people that drinking to excess is OK and if you're hungover, there's a quick fix.

John Rogerson, CEO of the Australian Drug Foundation, says "using qualified doctors to administer IV therapy is disgraceful and unethical", adding that a GP's role is to help people who might have a drinking problem, not encourage it.

"The biggest issue emergency department physicians deal with by far is alcohol. There are 5500 deaths each year due to alcohol-related causes and now we have people in the health industry basically encouraging people to drink more," he says. "It's totally inappropriate. We need to say to the community, 'Look at how much you're drinking – it's time to start cutting back.'"

Scott agrees, pointing to the impacts of getting drunk, such as poor decision-making and reaction times, and the long-term health risks, including brain injury, cancers and heart disease. He adds that the best way to combat the short- and long-term health repercussions – and avoid the need for a "hangover cure" – is to drink in moderation... or not at all.

5 Tips For Drinking Responsibly This Festive Season By John Scott

1. Eat something before and while you drink.
2. Set yourself limits and stick to them.
3. Drink slowly and alternate between having alcoholic and non-alcoholic tipples.
4. Ensure you have a plan for getting home safely.
5. Keep an eye on your drinks, and be aware that your behaviour when intoxicated may impair your judgement.