

Nation Liquor News

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'Health Warning Labels'

By Gordon Broderick

Recently the Tasmania-based Drug Education Network started a petition urging the Federal Government to mandate health warning labels on alcohol products. This is despite a spokesperson supporting that group acknowledging that there was no evidence that warning labels changed behaviour.

For many years, some drug, alcohol and health organisations in Australia have advocated the use of health warning labels on alcohol products as a way of combating alcohol misuse. A number of these organisations have renewed these calls recently, and a health group in New Zealand has lodged an application with Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) which, if successful, would require labeling advising of the risks of consuming alcohol when planning to become pregnant and during pregnancy.

This road has been travelled before. In 1999, the Society Without Alcoholic Trauma (SWAT) lodged a submission with the Australia New Zealand Food Authority, FSANZ's predecessor, requesting that alcohol products contain a warning label stating: "This product contains alcohol. Alcohol is a dangerous drug."

DSICA, other members of the alcohol beverage industry and other interested stakeholders strongly opposed this application for the introduction of health warning labels on alcohol products. The industry's opposition was based on several grounds.

First, there is very little research to indicate that a warning label applied to an alcohol product actually produces a positive change in drinking behaviour or reduces alcohol-related harm.

Second, there is very little evidence to show that a health warning label on an alcohol product is the most appropriate way of informing consumers about the health risks associated with alcohol misuse.

Third, there is only very limited evidence of the positive impact of health warning labels on consumer knowledge and attitudes towards alcohol consumption.

Finally, it is accepted that there are health benefits from low to moderate consumption of alcohol, and a warning label as proposed does not fully inform consumers.

After receiving some 47 submissions in response to the application, ANZFA rejected warning labels on alcohol, citing a number of reasons, including that:

- scientific evidence indicates that while warning labels may increase awareness, this does not necessarily lead to positive changes in behaviour, and may even result in increased ‘undesirable’ behaviour in ‘at-risk’ groups;
- simple, accurate warning statements would be difficult to devise given the complexity of issues surrounding alcohol use and misuse;
- there is a steady downward trend in alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in Australia and New Zealand;
- comprehensive health strategies concentrating on interventions known to work are already implemented in both countries;
- alcohol has health benefits when consumed at low to moderate levels;
- alcohol labels already provide content and standard drink information; and
- direct comparisons with tobacco warning statements are not valid because unlike alcohol, there is no level of tobacco consumption that can be considered to be safe or low risk.

DSICA strongly believes that warning labels are not the answer to combating alcohol misuse, particularly amongst at-risk groups.

This view is backed up by the international experience of warning labels. A US study reported in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* found that “among risk drinkers, the label law clearly has not affected drinking behaviour”. Further, the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse, in statements to a House of Commons Standing Committee, said that they have “seen no direct, incontrovertible evidence that applying warning labels to alcoholic beverage containers has any impact on reducing the problems associated with abusive drinking”.

And a study reported in *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* reported that “the results show that earlier exposure to the alcohol warning does not significantly reduce alcohol consumption, suggesting that the warning does not have a deterrent effect”. The report concluded that “the results of this study in conjunction with prior results for both adolescents and adults support the conclusion that the alcohol warning label does not reduce alcohol-related risk behaviours”.

Health warning labels may be appealing to some health lobbyists and certain governments because they are highly visible and they can point to them and say “look what we’ve done”. DSICA considers in this case that such ‘action’ does not equate to policy effectiveness. By all means, women should be made aware of the dangers associated with unsafe alcohol consumption during pregnancy, but labels are not the best way to deliver this information. DSICA’s long-held view is that carefully targeted public information and education campaigns are the most effective means of combating alcohol misuse.

