

Alcohol and the Preventative Health Taskforce - 24 Sep 2009



Gino Vumbaca - *24th September 2009*

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Imagine, if you can, our health system having to cope with an epidemic that claimed the lives of 60 people each week and required another 1,500 to be hospitalised each week with each year that passes being worse than the last. Unfortunately this has already been occurring over the past 10 years, and continues today— it's just that unlike viral epidemics we don't see the problems caused by the misuse of alcohol in the same way. The release of alcohol attributable deaths and hospitalisation data for the past 10 years in Australia by the National Drug Research Institute paints a very grim and disturbing picture in the harms from alcohol misuse in this country. Nationally there has been a more than 30% increase over the past decade in the number of people requiring hospitalisation each year due to alcohol misuse, during which time the ACT has seen a 64% increase and somewhat extraordinarily is the only jurisdiction to record an increase in alcohol caused deaths.

Perhaps the best news about this report is that it arrives at a time when the National Preventative Health Taskforce has developed and released a range of options designed to reduce alcohol related problems which unequivocally places the reduction of harms caused by alcohol at the top of national prevention priorities.

The health sector understandably supports the Taskforce's plan to address the annual multi-billion dollar harm caused by alcohol and tobacco in Australia. The use of taxation, floor pricing, labelling, restrictions on promotion and availability as well as attempts to change the overall culture of drinking in Australia reflect what the health sector internationally has known for some time to be best practice. However, it is the position to be taken by the alcohol industry that will generate greater attention, due partly to their historical willingness to fight hard against any changes to the profitable position they currently enjoy but also because they are likely paint any changes as the introduction of a nanny state, focusing on emotion rather than evidence.

The problem for the alcohol industry this time however is that the landscape has altered dramatically over the past few years. Despite finding themselves under intense political and public scrutiny due to soaring alcohol fuelled problems facing many parts of the country, the alcohol industry seems to be stuck behaving in a way that seems destined to ensure its standing will soon be equivalent to that of the tobacco industry - something it is surely privately conscious of, but can't seem to help it itself from avoiding.

Since the introduction of the alcopops tax last year, the alcohol industry has incessantly claimed that the tax will not affect consumption. While independent and treasury data showing that the tax has reduced consumption, the industry appears unmoved in its position on the ineffectiveness of the new tax. Any discussion on alcohol taxation is immediately derided as a tax grab, simply ignoring the international evidence that pricing is the most effective lever available to change consumption patterns.

Let's remember that the long held position of the tobacco industry was to deny any link between lung cancer and smoking when the evidence began to mount, and that advertising tobacco was for nothing more than changing brand preference. The performance of the alcohol industry is starting to show those same hallmarks.

For example, at the height of the alcopops debate there was the development of new alcohol products that are similar in taste and look to alcopops but cleverly manufactured to use non-spirit alternatives as their alcohol base to avoid the tax – an approach that has recently necessitated the Federal Parliament enacting new regulations on what constitutes an alcopop. How more alcohol products that taste and look like soft drink and clearly target the novice alcohol palate of young people displays an incredible misunderstanding of the public mood.

Maybe the explanation can be found at a promotional website set up by the alcohol industry to express the ‘public’ outrage at new laws introduced in NSW to reduce alcohol related violence. There is simply little public outcry at the new laws or sympathy for the industry. The public is however fed up with the violence and damage emanating from pubs and venues onto our streets. Yet in response we see the use of young attractive people employed to roam around pubs and bars to convince patrons to be photographed with cartoon style captions opposing the new laws—seemingly a desperate throwback to the days when women wearing playboy bunny outfits wandered around selling and giving away cigarettes. Consider the insult this campaign is to the thousands of victims each year from alcohol related violence. Maybe the website should also display photographs of the scenes and views of medical emergency staff and police dealing with the fallout from alcohol misuse.

The alcohol industry finds itself in a somewhat precarious position today. If they continue their strategy to undermine the desire of communities and governments to rein in the soaring economic, health and social costs from alcohol misuse, then it is likely to find itself sidelined completely whilst agencies act decisively and broadly to reduce the harms.

So despite the impending hollow protestations from the vested interests of the alcohol industry, the Preventative Health Taskforce is rightfully focused on improving the health and wellbeing of all Australians. More than ever before they deserve our support.

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