

Alcohol tax: a public health issue

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The Australian National Council on Drugs, the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in March 1998, has entered into the alcohol taxation debate.

The ANCD recognises that alcohol creates serious social and health problems in our community in fact, far greater problems than illicit drugs. There is little doubt that excessive levels of alcohol consumption damages the individual, contributes to road trauma, domestic violence, public nuisance and other crimes. At its most recent meeting in Darwin, the ANCD heard of the substantial problems created by alcohol, but it also heard about the long term benefits of the Northern Territory's Living with Alcohol Program.

Chairman of the Council, Major Watters was very impressed by the Program, and said "It is clear that the economic and social benefits from the Living with Alcohol Program could be replicated across the country. Based on the evaluation of this program, the ANCD calls on all Governments to consider the introduction of a dedicated levy on alcohol. The money generated from this new levy should then be directed entirely to fund alcohol prevention, education and treatment services, all of which are desperately needed."

Professor Margaret Hamilton, a member of the ANCD and National Expert Advisory Committee on Alcohol, added "In addition to the levy, the Council is also advocating a review of the alcohol taxation structure. Clearly, the choice that consumers make on what type of alcohol to purchase is affected by its price. Taxation can be an effective means by which people can be encouraged to change their drinking behaviours. Current taxation arrangements do not provide financial incentives for drinkers to choose beverages that cause less harm, such as low alcohol beverages. The Council realizes that a call for a new levy might not be popular, however we believe all Australians would be prepared to support a scheme which could reduce road deaths, domestic violence and family breakdown."

Major Watters went on to clarify "What we are talking about is a very small amount of money per drink. In my career in treatment services, I have seen 25 years of alcohol related tragedies. It is time to recognize the damage that alcohol is causing in our community, and fund proven strategies."

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