



INFORMATION SHEET: ALCOHOL WARNING LABELS

Background

- The subject of Government warning labels on alcoholic beverages has been debated for over a decade in New Zealand.
- Countries like the US have supported such labelling since 1989.
- New Zealand alcohol producers have put the required health warning information on products exported to the US since 1989. However, the same warning messages are not required on products sold in New Zealand.
- Alcohol is a mind-altering drug. Whilst its sale and supply is regulated through the Sale of Liquor Act, as it contains calories, its labelling is regulated as a food product.
- There is no level of alcohol consumption that can be considered safe for all people at all timesⁱ. Particular groups at risk include young people, pregnant and breastfeeding women, drivers and those responsible for the care of children.
- Since 1990, several attempts in New Zealand to introduce legislation requiring alcohol to carry warning messages have been rejected by Parliament.
- Warning labels on alcoholic beverages are supportive to other prevention strategies and interventions. Their purpose is to help raise awareness, which in turn can lead to behaviour change, as demonstrated in the tobacco control arena.
- For those who do not readily access health services, the product warning may be their only visual source of information.

Current situation

- In 2002, the Ministry of Health proposed alcohol warning labels as a possible action to help prevent cancerⁱⁱ.
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand is considering an application by the Alcohol Advisory Council, on behalf of the New Zealand Government, to require alcoholic beverages to carry information on alcohol use during pregnancy.
- The World Health Organisation states, that alcohol warning labelling are important in helping to establish a social understanding that alcohol is a special and hazardous commodityⁱⁱⁱ.
- From experience in tobacco control, effective health warnings meaningfully communicate information to smokers and others, and motivate behavioural change. International studies carried out after pictorial warnings were introduced for tobacco products showed consistent changes in awareness, attitude and behaviour^{iv}.
- Testing of warning labels for tobacco products found that larger health warnings were more effective^v.

Key Themes from the Law Commission report – Alcohol in our Lives

- Labelling for alcohol products is governed by the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code and work is currently going on concerning health advisory labels for alcohol products.
- In light of this the Law Commission have elected not to take up this issue.
- The requirement of health warning labels on alcohol production is included as an option. As is the requirement of nutritional information and ingredients to be listed on alcohol products.

For a full list of the Law Commission's options and the Alcohol Healthwatch response to these please refer to our Law Commission Tool-kit at www.ahw.org.nz.

An evidence-based response

- A requirement for prominent, specific and bold health warning labels using graphics to be placed on all alcohol products available in New Zealand, at point of sale and to accompany any permitted liquor advertising.
- A requirement for nutritional information and ingredients panels on alcohol products.

What else is needed

Other effective strategies to reduce alcohol related harms include:

- Ban all alcohol advertising and sponsorship
- Increase the price of alcohol through increased taxation and introduce a minimum price.
- Return the minimum purchase age to 20 years.
- Reduce the number and density of liquor outlets and the hours they are permitted to sell alcohol.
- Lower the Blood Alcohol Concentration to at least 50mg/100ml and zero for all those under 20 years and on restricted licenses.
- Increase and improve access and availability to appropriate treatment and rehabilitation options.
- Provide for a range of brief and early intervention options across health, education, justice and other sectors.

What we can expect from requiring alcohol warning labels

- Increased awareness of warning messages following the introduction of mandatory labelling on alcohol^{vi}.
- A decline in alcohol consumption by pregnant women who are light drinkers^{vii}.

References

ⁱ Ministry of Health. 2002a. *Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Adults: A Background Paper*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

ⁱⁱ Ministry of Health. 2002b. *Towards a Cancer Control Strategy for New Zealand Māori*. Tauporo: Discussion Document. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

ⁱⁱⁱ World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe. 2009. *Evidence of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm*. <http://www.euro.who.int>

^{iv} World Health Organisation. 2009. *World No Tobacco Day 2009 brochure: Showing the Truth, Saving Lives: The Case for Pictorial Health Warnings*.

<http://www.who.int/tobacco/resources/publications/wntd/2009/materials/brochure/en/index.html>

^v Environics 2000. Testing new health warning messages for cigarette packages: A summary of three phases of focus group research. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/tobac-tabac/research-recherche/por-rop/label-etiquet/index_e.html

^{vi} Kaskutuas L and Greenfield T. 1992. First Effects of Warning Labels on Alcoholic Beverage Containers. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 31(1): 1-14.

^{vii} Hankin J, Sloan J, Firestone I, et al. 1993a. The Alcohol Beverage Warning Label: When did knowledge increase? *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 17(3): 428-430.

For further information

See other Alcohol Healthwatch information sheets and comprehensive policy briefing papers at <http://www.ahw.org.nz>

To speak with a Health Promotion Advisor for assistance with your submission please call (09) 520 7036