

“Selling sickness”

regulating the marketing of ‘dangerous consumptions’

There is no doubt that alcohol, tobacco, high fat/sugar fast food, gambling and prescription drugs all represent what have been collectively referred to as “dangerous consumptions”. To a greater or lesser degree, however, these products and services, potentially hazardous to our health, are all still promoted to consumers.

A range of non-government organisations recently came together with researchers to share their knowledge and experience of the marketing of these consumptions. The “Selling Sickness” summit was organised by the Public Health Association.

Professor Janet Hoek from the Department of Marketing, Massey University, said that while there’s more evidence that advertising maintains and reinforces existing behaviours than creates new ones, it is still powerful in reinforcing problematic behaviours and can make unfamiliar behaviours seem familiar – so they’re more easily adopted.

Campaigners for an alcohol marketing free environment looked on enviously to what has been achieved in the tobacco field. In 1990, just prior to relaxation of the regulations restricting alcohol brand advertising, New Zealand led the world with a total ban on the advertising of tobacco products in print, television, radio, cinema and tobacco company sponsorship. Becky Freeman, director of Action on Smoking and Health, said however, that there’s still a lot to battle. Tobacco products are still promoted through advertisements at international sporting events and in imported magazines, through product placement within the content of programmes, through colourful shop displays, as well as branding on the packs themselves. Freeman thinks that the establishment of the Health Sponsorship Council Smokefree branding was “a smart move”.

Gambling is another area where marketing is severely restricted by legislation, but Zoe Martin from the Problem Gambling Foundation drew attention to its shortcomings, highlighting the subtle way gambling is promoted through means such as the marketing of casino events and through association with other forms of entertainment.

All groups present at the summit were unanimous that “self regulation” just “doesn’t work”.

Direct to consumer advertising (DTCA) of prescription medicines is a commercial freedom New Zealand shares only with the US. Professor Les Toop from Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences wants an end to DCTA. At the summit Toop discussed his concern about the significant safety issues involved. The advertisements, using all the usual persuasive techniques, oversell the efficacy of the drugs, make



no mention of risk and in some cases serve even to ‘create’ disease. There is simultaneous heavy promotion of the medicines to GPs. Toop said that the pre-vetting of ads done by the ASA as part of the self-regulation process doesn’t look at science involved, and unsurprisingly, complaints are rarely made.

The DTCA experience with self-regulation struck a familiar chord with those present familiar with the ASA codes for advertising liquor. Again, few complaints about liquor code violation are received. Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams suggested that few people have the time and energy to make a complaint, let alone awareness of the subtle impacts of alcohol advertising. Many real concerns, she said, are dismissed as hyperbole and satire. She also pointed out that, in the event of a successful complaint, little is gained when the ads have already achieved a high level of exposure, when meaningful penalties for breaches are lacking, and when content-based codes do nothing to stem the overall saturation of the population in alcohol advertising.

Celia Murphy, director of Obesity Action Coalition, said at the summit that saturation advertising for high-sugar, high-fat foods encourages poor food choices, especially among children and adolescents, and these ads are part of the equation in the environment that leads to obesity. Recent New Zealand studies have found that advertising in children’s environments has a preponderance of “unhealthy food” ads. “All this exposure normalises these foods so people believe it’s okay to eat them on an everyday basis.”

Obesity Action Coalition is critical of the recent revision of the *Codes for Advertising to Children and for Advertising of Food*. Murphy says the changes are minimal and so vague that industry can interpret them as they wish. For example, the new code says celebrities should not be used in ads to promote food and drink in such a way as to undermine a healthy diet; yet McDonald’s believe they will still be able to use Sarah Ulmer and Hamish Carter in their advertising. Industry responses to

the new codes have been that advertisers “shouldn’t have to change much”. “So what was the point of the review if nothing will change?” asks Murphy. The Obesity Action Coalition recommends that the government consider regulations to restrict the advertising of high-sugar, high-fat foods.

Cynicism about the move to increasing corporate social responsibility, invariably weak and ineffective, was a common theme at the summit. One of the first initiatives of New Zealand’s Food Industry Accord, for example, has been ‘Willy Munchright’, an animated television character of American (McDonalds)



Spot the responsibility message

origin which promotes healthy eating, but which is completely swamped by all the ads for foods offering poor nutrition. The drink responsibly message on the bumper of Jack Daniels racing car (left) is another example.

Professor Hoek believes that education will reinforce healthy eating patterns in those who already eat well, but is unlikely to persuade others. “Regulation is the only way to change behaviour patterns,” she said.

But despite agreement that regulation is the key to marketing control, obstacles to further regulation were all too familiar to summit participants. Political fear of being seen as “nanny state”, perceived lack of public support for more regulation, protection of the “right to advertise legal products” – were all familiar defences to the status quo.

Tim McCreanor of Whariki Research Group at Massey University presented findings from his recent study which clearly show how alcohol brands have been integrated into youth culture – in music, events and conversation.

“The review of the regulation of alcohol marketing this year presents a new opportunity for more effective regulation”, Rebecca Williams of Alcohol Healthwatch says, “and the experiences of public health groups concerned with other ‘dangerous consumptions’ may prove valuable”.

Confounded by ‘health benefits’ research

...more evidence helps to debunk “its good for you” theory

Promoted widely by the alcohol industry, the purported health benefits of moderate alcohol use are now influencing most national policy documents concerning alcohol.

In our last newsletter Christine Rogan reviewed recent research that gave pause to question the now popularly accepted notion that “alcohol is good for the heart” (*The Heart of the Matter, Issue 1*). The article cited a US study* of 250,000 adults which concluded that: “The health protective factors attributed to alcohol are more likely to be the result of residual or unmeasured confounding characteristics associated with increased cardiovascular disease mortality”.

Hard on its heels comes a significant meta-analysis reaching similar conclusions. An international group of researchers has investigated the suggestion that many studies made a serious error by including as “abstainers”, people who had cut down or quit drinking due to increased illness, disability, frailty and/or medication use.

Kaye Fillmore and colleagues* analysed 54 studies that linked how much people drink with risk of premature death. They found only seven studies that included in the ‘abstainers’ group only those who had been long term non-drinkers, and these studies showed there was no reduction in risk of death amongst moderate drinkers compared with abstainers.

When the systematic error was deliberately introduced in error-free studies, the apparent protective effect was produced, just like the flawed studies.

The authors say this does not disprove the notion that light drinking is good for you, but suggests that “light drinking is a sign of good health, not necessarily its cause.”

The authors recommend that future prospective studies

“should use far greater precision in their assessment of drinking behaviour and abstinence”. They also recommend a re-examination of studies that claim an apparent alcohol protective effect against dementia, cognitive function, type two diabetes, and even the common cold.

As suggested in the *News and Views* article, there is a need to re-think reference to the health benefits of alcohol in policy, particularly when it is used to support weaker policy options. Similarly the authors of this meta-analysis suggest that, “the present findings should give pause before accepting the major importance of cardiac protection from light alcohol use at a population level as a factor to be taken into account in policy directives and clinical practice”.

*Naimi TS, Brown DW, Brewer RD et al., 2005 Cardiovascular risk factors and confounders among non-drinking and moderate-drinking U.S. adults. *American Journal Preventive Medicine* 29(3):243.

* Fillmore K, Kerr W, Stockwell T, et al., 2006 Moderate alcohol use and reduced mortality risk: Systematic error in prospective studies. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 14(2): 101-132.)

New RTD offers ‘unique experience’ — and perfect marketing mix

A new ready-to-drink in New Zealand that’s bound to appeal to teenage thirst for innovation has recently been launched by Lion Nathan. Aqua Frutini is billed as offering a “unique experience”. Drinkers apparently taste different flavours first — some apple, others cherry and others banana. The product comes in a “funky” bright green, yellow and red 275ml bottle costing about \$2.50 — about the same as a bottle of water. Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams says that product development, design, packaging and pricing are all part of the marketing mix which aims to recruit young drinkers, and all need to be better controlled.

Arataki Rugby Club – paving the way to alcohol-free sports

For four months now Arataki Rugby Club has been without alcohol. There's no alcohol served after the games, no alcohol on the bus trips away and no alcohol at sidelines, where at some sports grounds it is considered a large factor in referee abuse. The usual drinking after matches has been replaced with entertainment and, it is said, "first class meals".

"Alcohol has got to get out of sport, out of sports sponsorship, and basically, out of people's lives..."

Greg Doolan, the team coach and man behind the turn around, is obviously a man of enormous energy, drive and vision, unafraid to challenge long standing boundaries. His vision extends beyond reforming his rugby team to challenging the ingrained relationship between alcohol and sport which, he believes, contributes to significant social problems. Alcohol, he says, has got to get out of sport, out of sports sponsorship, and basically, out of people's lives. And rugby, which is synonymous with drinking in New Zealand, should lead the way. He'd like to see rugby clubs be environments where mums and kids feel welcome and comfortable being around.

Doolan is driven by a belief that sports clubs should be key centres of health and well being for the community. A community focus for positive, health giving activity, rather than club drinking helping to feed domestic violence, crime and drug use. He has started to set up a range of off-field activities that reflect this vision. He says young people often use alcohol to facilitate communication, for example, so one of his plans is to teach life skills to young men to reduce this reliance. He has introduced a substance abuse programme "2Bfree!", which emphasises the advantages of being free from all kinds of dependence. Doolan has been running an after school reading, homework and leadership club for 5 to 13 year olds, called "The Tall Kauris" for the past two months. In addition to the learning assistance, the children are also fed a healthy meal. He has planned a parenting programme, "Heroes" which he will launch in August.

Doolan thinks this focus on healthy pursuits is the way of the future for sports clubs. Young people coming through are the future of rugby clubs but, in a world of increasing leisure

choices, clubs are facing declining numbers. They need to be kept "vital and relevant to the community". He is standing to be elected as a representative for the Regional Rugby Board.

"... We need to try to find a healthier way to fund a healthy pursuit..."

Doolan also decries the dependence of clubs on alcohol sales and sponsorship. He draws parallels to where the tobacco industry was 30 years ago. Alcohol advertising is "seductive and convincing," he says. "We need counterpunches to their messages". When tobacco sponsorship was banned in 1990, there was a huge outcry that we would never replace it, so Doolan thinks it can happen with alcohol too. "We need to try to find a healthier way to fund a healthy pursuit." Ideally he'd like to provide a working model to be able to take to the many other organisations and clubs which are struggling with the same issues. Local businesses around Aratiki, he says, have come forward and been wonderfully supportive. Doolan has set up a charitable trust for his club and is offering his coaching services free.

Cultural change, of course, doesn't happen overnight, particularly when it comes to our favourite drug. But Doolan says he is starting to see people in the team coming forward and taking another direction in their lives. From visitors, feedback about the team stance has been positive, however a frequent reaction is: "I don't think we can afford to go down this route, we are too dependent on the money across the bar to fund our activities."

Doolan also sees alcohol as a broader political concern. Before the next election he would like to see political parties stipulating what they are going to do to address alcohol issues. And he believes the nation needs more leaders in this issue. "No-one wants to call alcohol what it is, including politicians," he says. "Alcohol is a dangerous drug that is wreaking havoc in our communities and our nation. Hopefully from this type of initiative some new leaders will emerge who are focused on preventing the alcohol industry from marketing their drug through sports organisations, and glamorising it through media marketing."

Ending alcohol promotion in World Cup sport

Alcohol Healthwatch recently joined more than 260 non-government organisations from 43 countries to endorse the *Global Resolution to End Alcohol Promotion in World Cup Events*.

Organisers of the petition from the Centre for Science in the Public Interest in the U.S. were impressed at the response of support and concern in just one-month's time. "We now have a stronger foundation for combating alcohol promotion in sporting events."

Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams says the resolution is a way of challenging the organisers and those who profit from such huge sporting events to reflect on how they are contributing to the global burden of disease associated

with alcohol consumption.

"World Cup sporting events are watched by millions of people the world over, and their participants are incredibly powerful role models for the world's young people. Potentially, these events could be used in positive ways to highlight the values and benefits of sport while de-emphasising the all too common link between alcohol and sport."

Williams says the resolution presents a real challenge for the organisers of the Rugby World Cup, coming to New Zealand in 2011, to consider an alcohol-free sponsorship environment.

The petition, which is available at www.cspinet.org/new/200606221.html, was sent to FIFA in June.

Developments across the ditch

Tougher licence conditions for late opening Brisbane premises

In response to high profile assaults and disorder around licensed premises in inner city Brisbane, tougher conditions on licensed premises that trade after 1:00am are to be introduced. These conditions include:

- the employment of crowd controllers in sufficient numbers to ensure patrons are adequately controlled on and off the premises (a minimum of two for the first 100 patrons);
- mandatory Responsible Service of Alcohol training for all licensees and staff on duty at any time (to be completed within one month of employment) and;
- the installation of closed circuit television cameras at each entry and exit point of the venue.

Liquor Amendment Regulation (No. 1) No. 22, 2006

Requiring parental permission before supplying minors popular with Aussie police

In New South Wales the supply of alcohol to the children of others, even in private homes, must only be made with explicit authority of the child's parents. Recent reviews from other states (Western Australia and Victoria) recommend following the New South Wales model. Senior police say it would "give police more effective controls over the supply and consumption of liquor by minors on private premises and enable them to better deal with the private party environment.

For more information see the comprehensive Victorian Parliament report: *Inquiry into strategies to reduce harmful consumption of alcohol* (2006) www.parliament.vic.au

Australian National Alcohol Strategy

Of particular interest in the recently released *National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009* are recommendations for:

- examining the legal aspects of alcohol availability;
- investigating price related levers to reduce consumption at harmful levels;
- increasing community involvement in licensing decisions;
- enhancing the capacity and legitimacy of nurses and midwives in addressing alcohol-related health problems;
- data collection on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders;
- support for 'whole of community responses' to alcohol related problems and;
- an annual national alcohol action audit and forum to promote implementation of the strategy and accountability.

The strategy can be found at: www.health.gov.au

More liquor outlets increases neighbourhood problems

A research report recently released by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research found that the more licensed premises there are in an area, the more likely people are to experience problems of drunkenness and property damage. Attempts in Australia to place more effective limits on the number of liquor licences have been criticised as anti-competitive. The study suggests, however, that limiting premise numbers may be an effective measure to reduce problems associated with drinking.

Donnelly, Poynton, Weatherburn et al., 2006. Liquor outlet concentrations and alcohol-related neighbourhood problems Alcohol Studies Bulletin Number 8

...and elsewhere

Curb ads, say US attorneys

A group of 20 Washington State Attorney Generals want alcohol advertising reaching young people to be further restricted. They believe earlier and more aggressive drinking among young people is being driven by a culture of drinking created in part by alcohol industry marketing.

The group have requested the Federal Trade Commission ask the alcohol industry to limit its advertising to audiences where only 15% of population are under drinking age. The current self-regulatory guidelines require alcohol advertising reach only audiences where 70% are of the legal drinking age (21 years) or older. Advertisers, however, are concerned that such guidelines would make it difficult to advertise to a legal audience.

The Attorneys General have also asked the FTC to review how the industry handles complaints about alcohol ads.

Adweek, May 2006

Guam to vote on 21 year drinking age

New Zealand is not alone in considering an increase in its 'drinking age'. It is also a hot topic in the US territory of Guam, where a lobby group has successfully petitioned to get its initiative — which would increase the legal drinking age on from 18 to 21 years — on the general election ballot in November.

Coalition 21 and other proponents of the increase believe that a higher age will reduce incidents of underage drinking, help reduce teen drunken driving, sexual assault and teen pregnancy rates. The Responsible Choices for All Adults Coalition, however, while acknowledging there is a problem, is fervently opposed to increasing the age, believing it would be discriminatory to younger people. They support educating youths to make better choices.

Alcohol Healthwatch welcomes feedback on **News and Views**, and encourages readers to suggest items for future editions.



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