



**A L C O H O L
H E A L T H W A T C H**

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The “Keep it 18” campaigners have completely missed the point of the debate.

Alcohol Healthwatch Director Rebecca Williams says the arguments of the people campaigning for the legal purchase age for alcohol to remain at 18 years just don't stack up.

She points out that the banner paraded at Parliament calling for the age to remain at 18 was signed by tertiary students. Research from both here and overseas highlights that this group drink more hazardously than their non-student peers. There is strong tradition among students to lead the way in the hazardous drinking stakes.

As for discouraging people from travelling and studying in New Zealand Williams believes many parents and travellers will be looking at safety issues in this day and age. Having the country known for alcohol-related violence, crime and public disorder is not something that looks good in travel reviews or for attracting international students. People don't come here to get driven off the road by a drunk driver, get assaulted as they walk through our towns and cities or fail their courses because their drinking has taken over their study.

Another key error in their argument is that they are talking as if 18 and 19 year olds can't drink i.e. an aspiring politician unable to toast an election victory. We have a legal purchase age not a drinking age in New Zealand. Providing the supply of alcohol falls within the law there is nothing stopping young people drinking.

Williams adds that simply educating people to drink responsibly just doesn't work. We tend to forget that we are dealing with a drug, a psycho-active substance. When people have had a few drinks – young people and adults alike – their ability to reason and make constructive decisions about further drinking becomes impaired. All the education in the world makes no difference. Our drinking culture and the environment that has created it, quickly erodes any positive messages young people may have picked up. That's the cold hard reality.

The evidence is clear – the lowered purchase age has resulted in more harm to young people and society as a whole. It has made access to alcohol easier for younger teens. The evidence is also clear that returning the age to 20 is an effective strategy to reduce harm.

Alcohol Healthwatch stresses that the decision must be based on the evidence. Ideally it would also have public support. Both of these are strongly in favour of a return to 20 years.

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Action on Liquor Campaign information and a range of briefing papers on topics including sale of liquor, taxation, advertising and marketing can be found at www.ahw.co.nz