

Health experts reject industry-backed funding for alcohol research

Peter G Miller, Kypros Kypri, Tanya N Chikritzhs, Steven J Skov and George Rubin

TO THE EDITOR: The federal government is to be applauded for its decision to re-introduce the “alcopops” tax bill to Parliament and to try to retain the \$300 million raised so far for expenditure on services, programs and research to reduce alcohol-related harm in Australia. The alcopops tax was paid by consumers in the form of higher retail prices, which will fall dramatically if the government again fails to pass legislation to retain the tax.

If it transpires that the government cannot retain the revenue already raised, it should be given to an independent public health body (such as the National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC]) and not to DrinkWise via distillers and distributors, as has been suggested.¹ DrinkWise is a “putatively independent body that was originally funded by the alcohol industry”;² six of the 11 current members of its board are senior alcohol industry figures. The alcohol industry profits from drinking that contributes significant harm to individuals and communities,² and it can be relied upon to oppose policies that are known to reduce alcohol consumption across the population.^{3,4} DrinkWise and similar industry-backed organisations around the world promote industry-friendly programs that do not have an evidence base or are ineffective (such as education campaigns or tepid television advertising),⁵ while lobbying against the adoption of effective evidence-based interventions, such as higher taxes on alcohol, as these would affect profits.²⁻⁴

The Chief Executive of DrinkWise, Chris Watters, recently revealed the organisation’s position on the alcopops tax, reportedly asserting that it did not recommend “fiddling with alcohol tax” because it was “old thinking” and that “the facts just don’t stand up”, and noting that DrinkWise funds many educational programs across the country.⁶

There is a clear consensus among public health experts worldwide that increasing the price of alcoholic beverages is one of the most powerful and cost-effective strategies that governments have at their disposal to reduce unhealthy alcohol use.⁷⁻¹⁰ Other effective strategies include drink-driving legislation, random breath testing, increasing the minimum legal age for drinking or purchasing alcohol, restrictions on trading hours and numbers of licensed premises, and better enforcement of existing liquor laws. In contrast, comprehensive reviews of the evidence show that, by themselves, alcohol education programs are ineffective.^{11,12}

Alcohol industry-sponsored agencies have adopted similar public relations strategies to those used by the tobacco industry.³ These strategies distract attention from their concurrent lobbying against the adoption of policies that would actually make a difference. The laudable policy action taken thus far by the government in its attempt to implement the alcopops tax would be enhanced by supporting an independent body, such as the NHMRC, that has transparent funding strategies and criteria, based on an independent peer-review system, to distribute funding for alcohol-related research.

We, along with the more than 50 other scientists and health experts listed at <http://alcopopstatement.orgfree.com> who endorse and are signatories to this letter,¹³ will not seek or accept funding from DrinkWise. We call on other researchers and community agencies to consider their positions.

Peter G Miller, NHMRC Howard Florey Fellow¹
Kypros Kypri, Senior Research Fellow²
Tanya N Chikritzhs, Associate Professor³
Steven J Skov, Public Health Physician⁴
George Rubin, President⁵

1 School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC.

2 School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW.

3 National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, WA.

4 Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Darwin, NT.

5 Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Sydney, NSW.

petermiller.mail@gmail.com

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