

Unravelling fact from fallacy

A battle is underway over New Zealand's future alcohol policies, with the police, health professionals and many ordinary New Zealanders arguing that urgent action is needed to reduce the country's destructive heavy drinking culture. At the same time, the alcohol industry is lobbying hard to avoid policies that would restrict their profits. Not surprisingly, the public and politicians are hearing very different versions of the evidence from the two sides.

Alcohol advertising enthusiast, Glen Wiggs, adjunct professor of advertising at the Sunshine Coast University, argued in the *Dominion Post* last year (6/11/09) that increasing alcohol prices and reducing advertising are not only simplistic solutions to the national alcohol crisis but are measures that don't have scientific backing. He claimed these measures won't work on the basis of various bits and pieces of "crystal clear" evidence and challenged the Law Commission to unravel "fact from fallacy" in its review of alcohol policy.

It is timely, therefore, to revisit Professor Wiggs' claims, now that the Law Commission's final report has been issued and the government is considering action.

The Law Commission's Head, Sir Geoffrey Palmer spent nearly two years with his team reviewing the international evidence, including that of Professor Wiggs', as well as considering nearly 3000 submissions from throughout the country, the most ever received by the Law Commission on a social issue.

The conclusion of this thorough and independent process was that at the heart of New Zealand's heavy drinking culture is "unbridled commercialisation" of alcohol. It recommended that increasing the price of alcohol and decreasing the marketing and advertising are essential policies the government must adopt if it is serious about dismantling the heavy drinking culture in New Zealand. These are the facts; Glen Wiggs' pronouncements are the fallacy.

The Law Commission has outlined two mechanisms for increasing the price – introducing minimum pricing and increasing excise taxes – both of which, in concert, will bring about significant improvements for the country through reducing heavy drinking across the board. Just as important, is the recommendation to phase out marketing and advertising over a five year period, so that alcohol will be dealt with just like tobacco, with bans on both broadcast advertising and sponsorship. No more associating alcohol or cigarette use with being a cool, glamorous successful person and part of the in-group. No more pretending that alcohol will make you a sports star.

It has been these two measures applied to tobacco, increasing the price and decreasing the advertising, which have led the landscape changes to the smoking culture in New Zealand over the past three or four decades – changes that all New Zealanders now greatly benefit from but also changes that many did not think were possible. The same is true of heavy drinking.

And just like the tobacco industry before it, the alcohol industry is going to fight as hard as it can to maintain the current, hugely profitable environment it operates within. Their own internal industry documents show that increasing the price and decreasing advertising are two of three main measures they fear the most; the third being reducing the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for driving (Bond et al 2009). The industry knows better than anyone else how important it is to resist these measures, precisely because these are the effective measures that will reduce the excessive drinking of their most profitable customers, the 700,000 heavy drinkers.

Where does this leave the government? The Law Commission's blueprint is there for all to see, featuring increasing alcohol prices and decreasing marketing and advertising. The latest World

Health Organisation sponsored publication *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity* (Babor et al 2010), presents strong evidence in favour of both policies. To not enact new liquor laws based on this evidence, the government would run the strong risk of being viewed as a handmaiden of the self-interested alcohol industry. The fact that they have already virtually ruled out excise tax increases this perception alongside revelations of vineyard ownership and close relationships with large supermarket owners. However, to enact new liquor laws based on the evidence, the government has the potential to go down in history as great reformers.

Where would that leave drinkers? Low risk drinkers will continue to enjoy their simple pleasures of life largely unaffected other than paying small “loose change” increases in price; they are probably the types who aren’t particularly taken in by the marketing deception and advertising bull of the industry in the first place.

Heavy drinkers? They have the most to gain. They will begin to feel the support and encouragement of a new alcohol environment to reduce their hazardous and damaging drinking, through higher prices, freedom from constant marketing seduction to be a heavy drinker and the constraint of new drink driving laws which finally prohibits intoxicated driving. Add in better access to treatment in exchange for the oppressive 24/7 access to alcohol, life could take a serious turn for the better.

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