

19 March 2008

Mr Elton Humphrey  
Committee Secretary  
Australian Senate  
Community Affairs Committee  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Mr Humphrey

### **Re: Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007**

I refer to your correspondence dated 19 February 2008 inviting the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) to provide a written submission on the above Bill to the Community Affairs Committee.

Your invitation is gratefully appreciated and I provide the following information in response to the key issues that have been identified in the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007.

#### **Require health information labels on all alcohol products**

NCETA notes that a number of countries have placed mandated health warnings on the labels of alcoholic beverages. While there has been some evidence of consumer awareness of the messages conveyed by the warning labels, there is very little research evidence to suggest that a change in alcohol consumption has occurred as a result of these warnings<sup>1</sup>. Further, the introduction of health warning labels legislation in the United States for alcohol products has had mixed effects, depending on how noticeable the labels are, how graphic the content of the warnings are, and the target audience<sup>2</sup>.

While there has been considerable debate, both in Australia and internationally, about the efficacy of placing health warnings on alcohol beverage labels, Australia has not yet implemented such a system for alcoholic products in this country.

<sup>1</sup> National Expert Advisory Committee on Alcohol (2001). *Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies A background paper to the National Alcohol Strategy: A Plan for Action 2001 to 2003/04*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Agostinelli, G., & Grube, J. W. (2002). Alcohol counter-advertising and the media. A review of recent research. *Alcohol Research and Health*, 26(1), 15-21.

In its 2008 report, *Alcohol misuse: tackling the UK epidemic*, the British Medical Association recommended that there should be a mandatory requirement for all alcohol beverage container labels in the United Kingdom to include the following information:

- The number of units they contain<sup>3</sup>;
- The number of units which should not be exceeded each day;
- A warning message stating that consuming more than the recommended daily guidelines is likely to cause the individual or others significant harm<sup>4</sup>.

It is noted that the British Government has announced that, under a voluntary agreement between the Government and the alcohol industry, alcoholic drinks will have new health warning labels placed on them by the end of 2008. At this stage it is not clear what messages will be included on the proposed labels although there are indications that the messages will not be as strong as the ones that are used on tobacco products.

NCETA considers that placing health warning labels on alcoholic products is only one approach that can be used to counter the effects of alcohol advertising particularly on young people. In 2007, the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth found that young people's exposure to counter-advertising messages (such as public service broadcasts (responsibility ads), product warning labels and media education programs) was very low in comparison to their exposure to alcohol product promotion messages<sup>5</sup>.

An alternative approach for young people may be to provide them with knowledge about the advertising techniques that are used to promote alcohol. This includes providing young people with information that allows them to 'deconstruct' alcohol advertising and to teach them to think critically about the messages, brands and gender stereotyping depicted in adverts, as well as to be proactive rather than passive recipients of the advertiser's message. In addition, increasing children's understanding of advertisers' motives and their persuasive strategies along with teaching children about the partial truths that advertisers use (such as parties are more fun with alcohol) and that the rest of the story included vomiting, hangovers, absence from school, unwanted/unsafe sex, injuries and violence also merit further consideration.

### **Restrict TV and radio alcohol advertising after 9pm and before 5am, to stop alcohol being marketed to young people**

NCETA notes that while the time of day when alcohol adverts are broadcast on television and radio may restrict young people's exposure to those adverts it does not however prevent them from being exposed to the adverts and their messages. A study conducted in New Zealand found that 48% of 10-13 year olds and 83% of 14-17 year olds could recall

<sup>3</sup> NB: The British term 'unit' is the equivalent of the Australian term 'standard drink'.

<sup>4</sup> BMA Board of Science. (2008). *Alcohol misuse: tackling the UK epidemic*. London: British Medical Association.

<sup>5</sup> Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. (2007). *Drowned out: Alcohol industry "responsibility" advertising on television, 2001-2005*. Washington, DC: Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth.

at least four alcohol adverts, which were televised after 9pm, in one week of watching television<sup>6</sup>.

It is further noted that millions of dollars are currently spent on alcohol advertising in Australia not only in measured advertising, such as television, magazines, radio and billboards, but also on unmeasured forms of promotion, including branded materials, Point-of-Sale materials, giveaways, sponsorships and special events. Advertising can be broadly divided into two categories:

- Product advertisements which focus on the merits of a product (e.g. taste, quality and price) – it is noted that this is now a less common form of advertising;
- Image advertisements which attempt to engage the target audience by developing an idealised image or lifestyle associated with the product that reflects the target audience's goals. For young people, the goals are generally focused on fun, relaxation, romance, adventure and sexual or social acceptance. Importantly, it is these same themes and appeals that appear most prominently in alcohol advertising, particularly in youth-oriented television programs and magazines. Young people find meaning in their lives through their patterns of consumption, and alcohol marketing is believed to influence the formation of their social identity. In addition, the pervasiveness of alcohol advertising is likely to have a cumulative effect not only on the target audience, but also on others who may be incidentally exposed to it.

One of the major forms of unmeasured promotions which have a potential impact on young people and which may encourage them to engage in excessive drinking are non-advertising promotions conducted on licensed premises. These forms of non-advertising promotions usually involve the provision of low cost or free drinks (e.g. during 'happy hour' promotions) or the provision of giveaways and prizes. A recent study has found that, despite the existence of a Code of Practice for Responsible Promotion of Liquor Products, there were numerous examples of promotions that breached both the spirit and letter of the Code<sup>7</sup>. For example, the researchers found that a number of promotions which offered free entry for university students, 'student happy hours' and free transport from university campuses to venues and between venues all had the potential to encourage young people to drink at risky levels<sup>8</sup>.

In view of the above, NCETA considers that while there is some evidence to suggest that alcohol advertising bans are effective in reducing consumption and alcohol-related harm, the largest part of a company's marketing budget is often invested into other promotional activities, including:

- Sponsorship – including sporting events (where young people may not be the primary target but would nevertheless be exposed to the advertising that is associated with a particular sponsorship package);
- Point-of-Sale, and special event promotions;

<sup>6</sup> Wyllie, A., Zhang, J. F., & Casswell, S. (1998). Responses to televised alcohol advertisements associated with drinking behaviour of 10-17-year-olds. *Addiction*, 93(3), 361-371.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, S.C. & Lynch, M. (2007). Non-advertising alcohol promotions in licensed premises: does the Code of Practice ensure responsible promotion of alcohol. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 26, 477 - 485.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

- Advertising through the use of communication technology, such as mobile phones and the Internet – in particular the posting of alcohol promotional activities on both the Internet and mobile phones.

All of these types of activities would ultimately be unaffected by bans on alcohol advertising via television, radio, and magazines.

**Require all alcohol ads to be pre-approved by a government body comprising an expert from the medical profession, alcohol and drug support sector, accident trauma support sector and the alcohol industry**

NCETA notes that the guidelines for alcohol advertising in Australia are currently governed by the Australian Alcohol Beverages Code (ABAC). This Code, as with most other forms of advertising, is self-regulated by the alcohol industry. The Code has been designed to ensure that alcohol advertising takes into account the need for responsibility and moderation in liquor merchandising and consumption and that it does not encourage consumption by underage persons<sup>9</sup>.

The ABAC is operated by a management committee that comprises representatives from the alcohol industry, the advertising sector and the Australian Government. Under the Code Complaints about alcohol adverts are lodged with the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) in the first instance. Complaints received by the ASB are referred to the Chief Adjudicator of the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Adjudication Panel. Both the Chief Adjudicator and the Panel members are appointed by the ABAC Management Committee.

The effectiveness of the current ABAC system has been subject to conjecture with a recent study assessing the frequency and content of alcohol advertisements and promotions in 93 magazines that are popular with young Australians (18-30 years) and evaluating the degree to which the adverts complied with the ABAC guidelines<sup>10</sup>. The study found that 52% of the alcohol adverts, including promotions and sponsorship, appeared to contravene at least one section of the code. Further, 22% were deemed to have strong appeal to children or adolescents because they depicted alcohol in connection with skateboarding and partying and the characters within the adverts appeared younger than 25 years<sup>11</sup>.

The current ABAC system depends upon complaints being made and upheld before advertisements are withdrawn. Nevertheless, by the time a complaint is made and subsequently upheld, the intended period of advertising for the product is usually completed. In 2006 a total of 53 complaints (relating to 26 adverts) were received by the

<sup>9</sup> Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code, (2007) June [accessed online, 11 March 2008 at [http://www.abac.org.au/uploads/File/ABAC%20Code%20\(October%202007\).pdf](http://www.abac.org.au/uploads/File/ABAC%20Code%20(October%202007).pdf)]

<sup>10</sup> Donovan, K., Donovan, R., Howat, P., & Weller, N. (2007). Magazine alcohol advertising compliance with the Australian Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 26, 73 - 81.

<sup>11</sup> Donovan, K., Donovan, R., Howat, P., & Weller, N. (2007). Magazine alcohol advertising compliance with the Australian Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 26, 73 - 81.

ABAC Adjudication Panel. The Panel considered that 9 of these complaints fell within the Code and ultimately upheld 2 of the complaints<sup>12</sup>.

A recent review of the self-regulatory framework for alcohol advertising in New Zealand concluded that alcohol advertising contributes to the drinking culture in that country<sup>13</sup>. Based on the recommendations from that review, a new framework that moves from voluntary self-regulation to enforced self-regulation has been proposed. The key changes that have been proposed include:

- Extending the scope of the self-regulatory system to include a broader range of marketing (e.g., packaging, labelling, merchandising and Point-of-Sale promotions), and emerging advertising techniques (e.g. Internet);
- Increased monitoring and research and subsequent sanctions for non-compliance. The Director-General of Health has the power to issue a “cease and desist” order for breaches of the alcohol advertising code and fines will apply<sup>14</sup>.

Hence, while it is acknowledged that there are mechanisms in place to monitor alcohol advertisements and to receive complaints about offensive or inappropriate adverts, the evidence suggests that the existing code has limited effect on regulating advertisements and in actually dealing with complaints. NCETA considers that it may therefore be appropriate to further examine developments in other countries such as New Zealand to determine if they are applicable to or if they can be modified to suit Australian needs.

### **Ban alcohol ads which are aimed at children or which link drinking to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success**

Understanding the role of alcohol in any society is complex and challenging particularly when young people are concerned. To date, the majority of research and commentary about alcohol use in the Australian community has largely been informed by a strong empirical and epidemiological tradition. Relatively little work has been undertaken to examine the cultural drivers that are associated with alcohol and its various patterns of consumption. Further, the symbolic role of alcohol in Australian life has also received scarce attention and critical analysis.

There is an intrinsic connection between alcohol and sport in Australia and there are particular aspects of the drinking culture within Australian sport that pose risks to young people. Some of these include:

- Underage drinking on club premises;
- Modelling of intoxication;
- Drink driving to and from the club;

<sup>12</sup> Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code, (2007) June [accessed online, 12 March 2008 at [http://www.abac.org.au/uploads/File/ABAC%20Code%20\(October%202007\).pdf](http://www.abac.org.au/uploads/File/ABAC%20Code%20(October%202007).pdf)]

<sup>13</sup> Inter-Agency Committee on Drugs. (2007). *Report of the Steering Group for the review of the regulation of alcohol advertising*: Inter-Agency Committee on Drugs, New Zealand.

<sup>14</sup> Burton, M. (2007). *Liquor reforms balance regulation and responsibility - Government*, [accessed online, 12 March 2008 at [www.beehive.govt.nz/Print/PrintDocument.aspx?DocumentID=31031](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/Print/PrintDocument.aspx?DocumentID=31031)]

- Continued service to intoxicated patrons;
- Alcohol as a reward for athletic performance in the form of 'shouts' or free drinks.

In addition, the various components of the alcohol industry sponsor major sporting events and music and cultural festivals. It is further noted that this form of sponsorship also occurs at a local community level with hotels sponsoring local sporting teams and community groups.

There is a considerable body of literature that examines the role of intoxication in societies throughout history. Unfortunately, little work has also been undertaken in relation to intoxication and young people in Australia. In some contexts, intoxication is valued as proof of individual freedom, as a way to embrace pleasure and hedonistic pursuits and as a symbolic means by which to demonstrate rejection of authority and external constraints. In Australia, heavy drinking has long been a part of cultural self-identity, forming a central part of 'mateship' and friendship based on convivial and egalitarian relations<sup>15</sup>.

NCETA notes that one of the key aims of the *National Alcohol Strategy: 2006-2009: Towards Safer Drinking Cultures* is to reduce the incidence of intoxication among drinkers and one of its priority strategies is to increase community awareness and understanding of the extent and impacts of intoxication. The document also proposes the following key strategies for monitoring and reviewing alcohol promotions:

- Implement monitoring and annual reporting on the advertising and promotion of alcohol;
- Maintain prohibition of alcohol promotion that encourages rapid and/or high levels of alcohol consumption<sup>16</sup>.

In order to address the current research shortcomings and to address the key issues identified in the *National Alcohol Strategy: 2006-2009: Towards Safer Drinking Cultures*, NCETA is conducting a two year project to examine the various cultural factors that influence drinking among young people aged 14 to 24 years. Further details about this study are provided in the following section.

## **Current Research**

### ***Young People and Alcohol: An investigation of the cultural drivers of alcohol use among young Australians***

This project acknowledges that to date, the bulk of research concerning alcohol use in the Australian community has been informed by a strong empirical and epidemiological tradition. Relatively little work has been undertaken from a social or anthropological perspective that examines the cultural drivers associated with alcohol and its various patterns of consumption. The overall aim of this project therefore is to examine the key

<sup>15</sup> Hall, W., & Hunter, E. (1995). Australia. In D. B. Heath (Ed.), *International handbook on alcohol and culture* (pp. 7-19). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

<sup>16</sup> Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (2006). *National Alcohol Strategy: 2006-2009: Towards Safer Drinking Cultures*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

aspects of the social structure and social organisation to determine the context in which young people drink. The project is examining how related norms and values are established and why some individuals engage in various behaviours, such as risky forms of drinking, and others do not. Its key objectives are to gain an understanding of the following issues as they impact on 14-24 year old Australians:

- The perceptions, motivations, attitudes and behaviours towards 'low risk', 'risky' and 'high risk' alcohol use;
- The cultural drivers that underlie 'low risk', 'risky' and 'high risk' alcohol use;
- The motives for 'high risk' alcohol use;
- The differences in gender-related attitudes to drinking alcohol;
- The role of consumerism and individualism and how they influence risk-taking and drinking patterns;
- Leisure and lifestyle factors that may influence drinking-related decisions.

One of the key issues that participants in this project are being asked to consider is the role of the media and its impact on social behaviour and relationships. The findings from this study will be used to inform the development of initiatives that are aimed at addressing the factors that influence young people to drink alcohol. Please note that the report from the study is being released on Friday 28 March 2008<sup>17</sup>.

Please contact Mr Allan Trifonoff on (08) 8201 7511 if you require further information or if you have any questions about the content of this submission.

Yours sincerely



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<sup>17</sup> Roche, A.M., Bywood, P., Borglagdan, J., Lunnay, B., Freeman, T., Lawton, L., Tovell, A. & Nicholas, R. (2007) *Young people and alcohol: the role of cultural influences: An examination of the cultural drivers of risk-taking behaviour and their effects on 'low-risk', 'risky' and 'high risk' use of alcohol among 14-24 year old Australian drinkers*. Adelaide: National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction.