

MEDIA RELEASE

HEALTH AND COMMUNITY LEADERS CALL FOR ACTION ON ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY HEALTH WARNINGS

9 December 2011: 63 leading health and community professionals, including two former Australians of the year, have urged effective action to warn women about the effects of alcohol consumption during pregnancy, in an open letter to members of the Australian and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council.

The Council meets today in Melbourne to consider its response to the Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy – the Blewett Review – which recommended that a ‘suitably worded warning message about the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy’ be mandated on alcoholic beverages.

Signatories include prominent health experts and former Australians of the Year Professor Fiona Stanley and Professor Fiona Wood. Joining them are highly respected senior academics and health professionals including Dr John Crozier from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Professor Michael Farrell, Director of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda and Professor Ian Olver, CEO of the Cancer Council of Australia.

The letter points out that the *National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* state that ‘for women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking is the safest option’.

It also expresses concern about the approach of alcohol companies which, the letter says, ‘oppose mandatory health warnings and instead propose adopting a voluntary system...with weak warnings that are likely to have little if any impact’.

Professor Stanley, Director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, said Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders encompass a range of brain abnormalities and nervous system damage in children the result of alcohol exposure in utero.

“This is a preventable problem yet the community remains largely unaware of the potential harms that can result from alcohol use during pregnancy

“We need clear and effective warnings about the potential risks of alcohol use in pregnancy. I urge Ministers to put the health and welfare of children ahead of the alcohol industry.”

The letter was organised by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) and the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA).

Michael Thorn, FARE’s Chief Executive, said the alcohol industry had undertaken extensive lobbying against effective health warning labels since the Blewett Report’s recommendations were made public.

“The alcohol industry’s intention has been to get the various governments to either delay effective action or to adopt their own weak and ineffective labels,” Mr Thorn said.

“The Commonwealth’s position, announced last week, was to support the alcohol industry’s current inadequate voluntary labelling system for two years, after which time they would look to regulate them.”

“But research has shown that the alcohol industry’s labels are ineffective – which is presumably why they have been promoted by the industry.”

Professor Mike Daube, PHAA spokesperson on alcohol, urged the Ministerial Council to make a ‘simple conscience decision’ to mandate effective pregnancy warning labels for alcohol products.

“There is overwhelming evidence that the industry’s preferred approach of soft, small, voluntary warnings will have minimal impact,” Professor Daube said.

“Surely our governments can manage just one small step to show that protecting unborn children is more important than protecting the drinks industry.”

The letter can be accessed at <http://www.fare.org.au/media-news/>

Michael Thorn and Professor Daube are available for interview.

– Ends –

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Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education (FARE): FARE is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Since 2001, FARE has invested over \$115 million in research and community projects to minimise the impact of alcohol misuse on Australians. Through our national grants program and commissioned research, the FARE has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. We work with community groups, all levels of government, police, emergency workers, research institutions and the private sector to address alcohol-related problems. For further information visit our website: www.fare.org.au

Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) – PHAA provides a forum for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and information on public health. The Association is also involved in advocacy for public health policy, development, research and training. PHAA has [Branches](#) in every state and territory. Membership of around 1500 individuals spans the health spectrum and over 40 public health related occupations are represented. PHAA has thirteen [Special Interest Groups](#) for members to meet with those who have similar interests and passions, to exchange information and to develop policy positions and papers.