

MEDIA RELEASE

Call for action on alcohol warning labels to prevent alcohol use during pregnancy

Wednesday, November 9, 2011: Federal and State Health Ministers have been urged to support health warning labels for alcohol products as new research has shown strong support for their introduction.

The research, which is being released today and which was commissioned by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) and carried out by Galaxy Research, found that 58 per cent of people were supportive of health warnings being applied to alcoholic beverages, with 86 per cent being in favour of a FARE label warning about the dangers of drinking while pregnant.

Other findings showed a marked preference for labelling to be mandated and regulated by government and a majority in favour of the warnings being on the front of bottles.

Australia's health ministers are meeting in Brisbane tomorrow, ahead of the Federal Government's long-awaited response to a major review into food labelling. In January, former health minister Neal Blewett presented 'Labelling Logic', his comprehensive review of food labelling laws and policy in Australia and New Zealand to the Australian and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council. The Federal Government has said it will respond to the report next month.

FARE has also called for the immediate introduction of warning labels about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant, a measure that was overwhelmingly backed by both the research and the Blewett Review.

Labelling Logic made a number of recommendations relating to alcohol, one that "generic alcohol warning messages be placed on alcohol labels" as a part of a national campaign targeting the public health problems and another that "a suitably worded warning message about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant be mandated".

In August, FARE released five model labels in response to the recommendations of the Labelling Logic report, including a pregnancy warning label.

The new research demonstrated that people were supportive of FARE's proposed warning labels and believed that they would be effective in raising awareness of harms. Particular support was shown for the pregnancy warning label, where 86 per cent of people thought that the label would raise awareness and 66 per cent believed it would change behaviour.

"This issue is far too important to be left to self-regulation by industry," Michael Thorn, FARE's Chief Executive, said. "In fact, 72 per cent said they believe the government should be responsible for the regulation of labels and just 12 per cent wanted industry responsible for the regulation of labelling.

"This clearly shows that the public are wary of the industry's bona fides in this regard."

Mr Thorn called on the Health Ministers to back labelling.

“The Blewett Review was the most comprehensive review of food labelling ever attempted in Australia and New Zealand and the Galaxy research shows that Australians want something done to try and stem the enormous array of alcohol-related problems that society is increasingly confronting,” he said.

“We are concerned that the recommendations on alcohol labelling might be lost amid the wider food labelling review and are calling on the Health Ministers to ensure that action is taken. We also believe it is essential that immediate action be taken on labels warning of the harms associated with alcohol use while pregnant.

“Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder [FASD] is an issue that has been neglected for far too long and this is a chance for governments to at least begin the process of trying to lessen that problem.

“We don’t see labelling as the answer to all the harms caused by the consumption of alcohol, but we see it as an essential first step because the research shows that it does make a difference.”

FASD is caused by the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. It is widely recognised as a preventable cause of birth defects and brain damage in children.

In other Western countries between 2 and 5 per cent of children are born with FASD, which would equate to thousands of Australian children being born with FASD each year.

A leading expert in FASD, Clinical Professor Carol Bower from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, said there was “an enormous amount of research going on at the moment to try and establish the real levels of FASD in Australia because many experts think it is under-diagnosed. What we do know is that like all alcohol-related harms, FASD has a huge impact on not only the individual but on family, friends, community and government services and I join with the call for warnings not to drink while pregnant to be immediately introduced.”

The research showed strong support for each of the labels proposed by FARE. Apart from the harms of alcohol consumption during pregnancy, the labels also highlighted a number of the other problems associated with risky drinking including increasing the risk of developing cancers, increasing the risk of injury, damaging the young developing brain and the dangers of drinking and driving.

Michael Thorn, Chief Executive, FARE and Clinical Professor Carol Bower are both available for media interview.

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Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education (FARE): FARE – formerly the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation - 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