

MEDIA RELEASE

NATIONAL BODIES JOIN IN CALL FOR ACTION ON ALCOHOL WARNING LABELS

November 9, 2011: A number of influential national bodies have joined in the call for government action on the labelling of alcohol following the release of research which showed widespread public support for the measure.

The National Alliance for Action on Alcohol (NAAA) has urged Australian governments to make alcohol warning labels mandatory, a stance echoed by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) and the National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Related Disorders (NOFASARD).

Professor Mike Daube, the co-chair of NAAA and the director of the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth, urged Australian governments to make alcohol warnings mandatory.

“Despite the immense harms caused by alcohol in our community, governments current do not require even the most basic of warnings,” Professor Daube said. “Meantime, the absence of effective warnings sends out a clear signal that governments don’t see any cause for concern. The harm is there, the evidence is there, the public support is there – it is time for governments to act.”

Professor Daube said: “ Consumers of all ages have a right to clear, informative warnings about the risks of alcohol use in pregnancy, and the wide range of other major health and social problems related to alcohol, including injury, road crashes, cancer and damage caused to the developing brain. There is a world of difference between the soft, barely noticeable warnings favoured by the drinks industry and the kind of warnings that are needed.”

Todd Harper, Co-Chair of the Alliance and CEO of the Cancer Council Victoria, said that health warning labels as part of a comprehensive approach can be effective in both raising awareness of health risks and changing people’s behavior, because they target consumers at critical decision points – when they are buying and when they are drinking alcohol.

“Decisions about health information and warnings should be made by governments and health authorities, not by an industry whose first interest is in maximising sales of its products. We urge all Australian Health Ministers to make a commitment to introducing strong, effective alcohol warnings”.

The research, 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 today, 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 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.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (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."

Michael Moore, the CEO of PHAA, said FARE's research showed "overwhelming support for warning labels which identify the dangers of alcohol. This is particularly clear with regard to the harm associated with drinking alcohol while pregnant."

While acknowledging that there was no quick fix to the prevention of harmful consumption of alcohol, Mr Moore said it was known that some measures would be helpful, including a reduction in availability and an increasing understand of the harms that are associated with inappropriate use. "This is why the PHAA and others are calling for urgent action on labelling of alcohol."

Sue Myers, the chair of NOFASARD, thanked FARE for initiating the research, and said her association believed "a health advisory label on all alcohol products will raise awareness about alcohol's potential harm to the unborn baby and this is the critical first step in any programme designed to inform, influence and effect behaviour change."

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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