

Health experts reject industry-backed funding for alcohol research

Peter G Miller, Kypros Kypri, Tanya N Chikritzhs, Steven J Skov and George Rubin

TO THE EDITOR: The federal government is to be applauded for its decision to re-introduce the “alcopops” tax Bill to Parliament and to try to retain the \$300 million raised so far for expenditure on services, programs and research to reduce alcohol-related harm in Australia. The alcopops tax was paid by consumers in the form of higher retail prices, which will fall dramatically if the government again fails to pass legislation to retain the tax.

If it transpires that the government cannot retain the revenue already raised, it should be given to an independent public health body (such as the National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC]) and not to DrinkWise via distillers and distributors, as has been suggested.¹ DrinkWise is a “putatively independent body that was originally funded by the alcohol industry”;² six of the 11 current members of its board are senior alcohol industry figures. The alcohol industry profits from drinking that contributes significant harm to individuals and communities,² and it can be relied upon to oppose policies that are known to reduce alcohol consumption across the population.^{3,4} DrinkWise and similar industry-backed organisations around the world promote industry-friendly programs that do not have an evidence base or are ineffective (such as education campaigns or tepid television advertising),⁵ while lobbying against the adoption of effective evidence-based interventions, such as higher taxes on alcohol, as these would affect profits.²⁻⁴

The Chief Executive of DrinkWise, Chris Waters, recently revealed the organisation’s position on the alcopops tax, reportedly asserting that it did not recommend “fiddling with alcohol tax” because it was “old thinking” and that “the facts just don’t stand up”, and noting that DrinkWise funds many educational programs across the country.⁶ There is a clear consensus among public health experts worldwide that increasing the price of alcoholic beverages is one of the most powerful and cost-effective strategies that governments have at their disposal to reduce unhealthy alcohol use.⁷⁻¹⁰ Other effective strategies include drink-driving legislation, random breath testing, increasing the minimum legal age for drinking or pur-

chasing alcohol, restrictions on trading hours and numbers of licensed premises, and better enforcement of existing liquor laws. In contrast, comprehensive reviews of the evidence show that, by themselves, alcohol education programs are ineffective.^{11,12}

Alcohol industry-sponsored agencies have adopted similar public relations strategies to those used by the tobacco industry.³ These strategies distract attention from their concurrent lobbying against the adoption of policies that would actually make a difference. The laudable policy action taken thus far by the government in its attempt to implement the alcopops tax would be enhanced by supporting an independent body, such as the NHMRC, that has transparent funding strategies and criteria, based on an independent peer-review system, to distribute funding for alcohol-related research.

We, along with the more than 50 other scientists and health experts listed at <<http://www.webcitation.org/5gbwQWf9J>> who endorse and are signatories to this letter,¹³ will not seek or accept funding from DrinkWise. We call on other researchers and community agencies to consider their positions.

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Trish M Worth

IN REPLY: I write in response to the letter from Miller and colleagues, recently published online.¹ Their letter is an attempt to influence non-government senators as the Australian Government reintroduces the Bill to increase the tax on some alcoholic beverages. There must have been a better way to do this than by besmirching the good work of DrinkWise and its directors.

DrinkWise Australia is not an industry-dominated body. It has a balanced board of six members from the alcohol industry and six distinguished community members. Miller and colleagues should know that, in criticising DrinkWise, they also attack the reputations of board members Professor Ross Kalucy, Chair of Psychiatry at Flinders University; Noel Turnbull, Adjunct Professor in Communications at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology; Neil Comrie, former Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police; and Terry Slater, who led the Australian Government's public health programs before heading up the National Food Authority and the Therapeutic Goods Administration. The sixth community representative position on the board is currently vacant and has been offered to the federal health department.

DrinkWise does not advocate for or lobby government in respect of alcohol taxation policy for a very sensible reason — alcohol industry leaders advocating for or agreeing on matters affecting price could constitute a breach of the *Trade Practices Act 1974* (Cwlth).

DrinkWise programs are strictly evidence-based, drawing on specifically funded high-level independent research executed by leading academics at universities including Griffith, Macquarie, Monash, Deakin, Flinders, and the Hunter New England Institute. Moreover, the DrinkWise “Kids Absorb Your Drinking” advertising campaign was developed through qualitative, quantitative and ethnographic research, as well as the findings of an extensive literature review by child health experts and academics.²⁻⁹ Campaign tracking results show that 28% of adults surveyed in March 2009 reported having reduced the amount of alcohol they drink in front of their children in the previous 12 months. When parents who had seen the DrinkWise advertising were asked about its impact on their drinking behaviour, 39% said they were more self-conscious of how they drink in front of their children, 18% had changed their drinking patterns, and 14% had actually cut down how much alcohol they consume when their children are around.¹⁰

DrinkWise Australia:

- receives funding from the federal government and the alcohol industry for the development of both its evidence base and its programs;
- has no associations with any international alcohol or tobacco lobby groups;
- undertakes research through Australian universities to develop the evidence base for its interventions;
- does not interfere with specification of the research hypotheses, research design and techniques, or publication of results;
- ensures that the research it funds is undertaken in accordance with the universities' protocols for conducting independent research; and
- grants the researchers it funds a “non-exclusive, royalty-free, perpetual license to use, reproduce, adapt and publish Project IP [intellectual property] for research, education, academic and consulting purposes”.¹¹

I was particularly surprised that the letter's authors would trivialise the importance of education in successful drug intervention programs and instead advocate for increased reliance on supply-side strategies. DrinkWise delivers interventions in a variety of settings, not only through the Kids Absorb Your Drinking campaign, but also through practical tools such as a website (<http://www.drinkwise.com.au>), information materials and discussion forums, as well as working at the grassroots level with groups such as local government, school organisations, community newspapers, Sports Challenge Australia and the Good Sports program. Educational programs informed by scientific literature, that are implemented and evaluated effectively and not used as a standalone intervention strategy, can work.¹²

We at DrinkWise hope that anyone with a strong commitment to public health will be able to work with us and not against us. This will ensure that we will be able to continue to run evidence-based initiatives to reduce alcohol-related harm in Australia.

Competing interests: I receive payment from DrinkWise Australia for my role as Chair, and travel assistance to attend meetings (economy airfares, accommodation and travel costs). DrinkWise Australia is funded by the Australian Government and the liquor industry. I have never been employed by or received funding from any alcohol company.

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