

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO READY-TO-DRINK ALCOHOL BEVERAGES

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INQUIRY INTO READY-TO-DRINK ALCOHOL BEVERAGES:

It is widely recognised that there is a serious problem with young people binge-drinking on 'Alcopops' – ready to drink, sweet tasting, attractively packaged, spirits/fruit juice/soft

drink mixes, with an alcohol content of 6 – 7% . The drinks are very much about masking the alcohol taste and are directly aimed at young people, though the alcohol industry may not admit this.

A 2005 national survey of alcohol use by secondary school students showed that 47% of girls aged 12 – 17 and 14% of boys that age had drunk pre-mixed spirits in the previous week.

A study by Choice magazine interviewing 78 teenagers between 18 and 19 found that 60% liked the taste of ‘Alcopops’. Only 25% liked wine and 38% liked beer.

Young people can buy three drinks with 7% alcohol and get the same effect for less outlay than if they bought five 5.5% drinks, which appeals to young people on a budget.

We believe that the Government’s proposed changes to the alcohol excise regime should reduce the excessive consumption of ready-to-drink alcohol beverages because of their increased cost. However, it will be unfortunate if, as muted by some people, that some young people may turn to other spirits with a lower tax. Should the tax be raised on all, particularly those with a high alcohol content?

There is no question of the significant public health benefit if alcohol consumption can be lowered. These benefits are well-known, both physically on various parts of the body and keeping the brain from being harmed.

We commend the Government on their proposed spending in these areas:

- * The \$14.4 million to help sporting clubs develop codes of conduct on binge drinking among their members. One survey showed that 13% of 18 – 20 year-olds drank thirteen or more standard drinks when visiting sporting clubs which is hazardous.
 - * The \$19.1 million on education and early intervention programs for teenagers under 18 with at least one pilot program in each State. One pilot program may not be sufficient. It would need to be ongoing and widespread to be really effective.
 - * The \$20 million over two years on a “shock” advertising campaign, similar in nature to campaigns on smoking, speeding and AIDS, on TV, radio and internet. This is very important. Of course there are some people who will take no notice of any warnings, but such shock advertising campaigns do have an effect on many. However, advertisements need to be changed regularly and the campaign needs to continue for years until the community values are impacted.
- Any incentives to encourage production and consumption of lower alcohol content beverages would be well worthwhile.

INQUIRY INTO READY-TO-DRINK ALCOHOL BEVERAGES CTD. -2-

The higher cost of drinks or anything is a deterrent and usually does have an effect in the purchasing of them and we trust this will be so.

But raising the tax is of itself insufficient. Legislation is needed to reduce the allowable alcohol content in the ready-to-drink mixtures to say, no more than 3%.

A few other suggestions for alternative means of limiting excessive alcohol consumption and levels of alcohol related harm to young people:

- * Uniform laws need to be introduced throughout Australia, involving heavy penalties, as they are at present in New South Wales, to prevent anyone other than teenagers' parents giving them alcohol.
- * Introduce a Zero Blood Alcohol Concentration limit for both Learner and Provisional drivers.
- * Use fine young people who have had some alcohol problems but are now abstinent and enthusiastic in enjoying life, to speak in schools and youth groups etc.
- * We believe it would help to gradually raise the drinking age, one year at a time, up finally to 21 years. This has proved to be successful in a couple of other countries.
- * The availability of alcohol needs to be more restricted and of course this is a matter for the liquor licensing department.
- * The example and attitude of adults is so important. When parents have high standards in regard to alcohol consumption, adolescents develop more alcohol-free recreation and peer pressure reduces.