



Alcohol and the other Drugs Council of Australia
on behalf of the Alcohol and other Drugs Sector

Submission
Senate Inquiry into
Ready-to-Drink Alcohol Beverages

30 May 2008

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Introduction

The dangers associated with alcohol misuse have become a national issue, as growing concern surrounding binge drinking by our youth and excessive consumption of alcohol generally continues to dominate community debate.

Recent comments in the media by the Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP, regarding the epidemic of “binge drinking” among young people, the June Alcohol forum to be led by the Government, and their decision to increase the tax on ready-to-drink (RTD’s) alcoholic beverages, as well as the recent Senate Inquiry to consider the *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007* have combined to bring alcohol issues to the forefront of the national health agenda.

The culture of heavy drinking permeates our society, and bringing about change will need a coordinated, educated and a strategic public awareness approach. ADCA on behalf of the AOD sector believes to adequately address the longer-term issues associated with alcohol misuse there must be an agreed commitment between Government, the Alcohol and other Drugs sector and most importantly the alcohol Industry.

ADCA welcomes the opportunity to contribute further to this Inquiry, on this occasion focusing on RTD issues, with the aim of building a platform for finding long-term solutions for what has finally been recognised as a matter of critical importance.

ADCA and the AOD sector – Who we are and what we do

The Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) is the national peak body for the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) sector, providing an independent voice for the people working to reduce the harm caused by alcohol and other drugs.

ADCA is a non-government, not-for-profit organisation principally funded through the Australian Government’s Community Sector Support Scheme and the National Drug Strategy Program. Some additional funding is provided through membership fees, subscriptions and project activities.

As the national peak body, ADCA has a key role in advocating for adequate infrastructure support and funding for the delivery of evidence based alcohol and other drug initiatives. In this regard, ADCA represents the interests of a broad group of service providers and individuals concerned with prevention, early intervention, treatment, supply reduction and research.

At 30 May 2008, ADCA’s membership covering Associate Organisations, and individuals totalled 376 covering organisations, services, agencies and individual professionals, practitioners engaged in alcohol and other drug services throughout Australia, major university research centres, tertiary institutions offering courses in addiction studies and other programs for alcohol and other drug workers, law enforcement and criminal justice systems, policy development and analytical areas, and administration.

ADCA’s broad and diverse membership base across all jurisdictions provides input on key strategic issues through active participation as members of ADCA’s Reference Groups.

ADCA's position on Ready-to-Drink alcoholic beverages

ADCA and the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) sector believes this subsequent Inquiry into the consumption of Ready-to-Drink (RTD's) alcoholic beverages is another opportunity to harness the resources of government, community groups, non-government organisations (NGO), prevention and treatment services, industry representatives, the community, and the media to join together to tackle the important issue of alcohol misuse in Australia.

ADCA is dedicated to providing a strong voice in the current climate, to help bring about positive change for our community. However, we cannot move forward without cooperation, communication and most importantly the resources to underpin a national strategy to overcome these issues.

Since September 2007, ADCA has been actively advocating to raise awareness within the wider community that Alcohol is a drug – *TOO!* We have revised a number of policy positions which includes a paper on alcohol, comorbidity, workplace, and workforce, which the organisation believes has a significant impact on our society (ADCA 2008).

ADCA has noted the agreed outcomes in the Joint Communiqué issued after the Ministerial Council on Drugs Strategy meeting in Melbourne on 23 May 2008. In particular, ADCA endorses the national approach which aims to reduce the incidence of alcohol-related violence, and the impact of alcohol abuse on individuals, the community and the health system. It is hoped that ADCA, on behalf of the AOD sector, will be invited to be part of the implementation process to be initiated at the proposed June Alcohol Forum to be led by Ministers.

ADCA also considers that it is essential for the Peak to be a major stakeholder in the Government's consultation process when developing drug and alcohol strategies for young people through the Australian Youth Forum.

ADCA also welcomes the recent amendments to the *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998* in Victoria which will enhance enforcement powers, increase penalties and ban inappropriate advertising or promotion of liquor sales and licensed premises. ADCA and the AOD sector believes it's this sort of action, combined with education and awareness initiatives that will help to address the longer-term issues surrounding alcohol misuse and can be seen as an important 'first step' in overcoming youth related alcohol issues (Victorian Minister for Consumer Affairs media release, Wednesday 21 May 2008).

Evidence provided by Dr Steven Skov from the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine at the recent Inquiry for the *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007* indicated that the consumption of Ready-to-Drink (RTD's) alcoholic beverages was on the increase, particularly by young women, and suggested that 'young people often drink RTD's without being aware that they are quite as strong as they are, with quite a number of subsequent harms' (Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007 - Committee Hansard Tuesday 6 May 2006 CA73).

Law enforcement agencies and emergency medical departments of the hospital system across Australia are often left to manage situations which involve highly intoxicated individuals. This is particularly evident during peak celebratory periods such as the end of a school year, as well as the Christmas and New Year periods when people believe excessive drinking is essential to having a good time (ADCA Schoolies media release, 12 November 2007). In fact, in Western Australia 60% of all police attendances and 90% of all late night calls involve alcohol (NDRI submission to *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007*).

It's time to challenge the way we think about alcohol so that we can start making different choices to enhance the overall wellbeing of the community - change attitudes to drinking, act as responsible role models, and refrain from using alcohol as a means to celebrate success.

In the case of this submission ADCA has drawn on the expertise of professional frontline workers from the widest possible spectrum. ADCA is continuing to consult widely with relevant stakeholders with the aim of assisting the Inquiry in its deliberations, and is ready to play a strategic role in the implementation and delivery of Inquiry recommendations.

AOD experts discuss Ready-to-Drink health-related issues

A recent national survey conducted by Quantum Research in 2008 examined the attitudes and actions of Australian drinkers and found that on average over a one-week period men, aged 14 years and older, consumed 7.6 standard drinks on a typical occasion, which is almost four times the number of standard drinks recommended in the current NHMRC guidelines. It was also found during this time that young women, also aged 14 years and older, drank an average of five standard drinks over the same period, which is more than twice the recommended daily limits (AERF media release 13 March 2008). Despite the results of the survey many of the respondents interviewed believed they did not have a drinking problem.

The culture or belief in Australia that its okay to drink excessively is not limited to adults, every year about 50 teenagers (14-17 year olds) die from alcohol attributable injury and disease and another 3500 are hospitalised (NDRI submission to *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007*).

In April 2008, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed the extensive growth in the availability of pre-mixed drinks or RTD's, and highlighted its popularity when compared with all other categories of alcohol (The Australian Newspaper 16 April 2008), and when compared with the rest of the world, in a 2003 AC Nielsen survey, Australia topped the list of consumption of RTD's at 13.7 litres per person, with Britain in second place with an average of 8.4 litres per person (The Sydney Morning Herald 26 May 2008).

In addition, a separate 2006 AC Nielsen survey – Scan Track Liquor, examined a market overview of alcohol which showed that RTD's are the leading growth category of alcohol, within total packaged liquor, despite slowing from 11.6 percent to 7.7 percent in 2005-6 (AC Nielsen survey 2006).

While the latest AC Nielsen Scan Track Liquor survey data (as commented on by Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia (DSICA) in a media release on 29 May 2008) suggests that 'there have been increased sales of hip flask size and 700ml bottles of spirits, with a slight decline in RTD sales'. ADCA is of the opinion that in reality this is only a two-week snapshot since the new RTD taxation announcement.

The claim made in the DSICA media release that 'this new data is the first hard and unequivocal evidence of the unintended social and health consequences of the Governments RTD tax hike' is data collected over a very short term and in ADCA's opinion is not definitive.

Furthermore, for the Industry to be rallying the owners and managers of liquor stores throughout Australia to act as media spokespeople regarding claims that there has been a dramatic increase in sales of full strength spirits and mixers would appear to be an over reaction and again highlights the failure and irresponsibility on the part of Industry, to appreciate the need to address a major national, community problem of alcohol-related harm.

Now more than ever, there is an understanding within the Federal Government, State and Territory Governments, Local Government, the AOD sector, and the community of the appeal RTD's have on our youth and more importantly the negative impact they are having on teenager's health and well-being. "What we've seen is an onslaught of advertising, particularly of the pre-mixed drinks, the ready-to-mix alcohol pops...that's obviously where the big growth areas are in the alcohol industry" (Australian National Council on Drugs in The Australian Newspaper 16 April 2008).

Promotion and marketing of RTD's

ADCA on behalf of the AOD sector remains concerned with the current alcohol climate and questions the way these beverages are being marketed and promoted within Australia.

The AOD sector is primarily worried with the way RTD's are packaged and promoted, in particular the Industry's focus on using brightly coloured designer cans and bottles (up to 275ml) which provide a similar appearance to many popular soft drink brands that are regularly consumed by our youth. An example of this sort of deliberate marketing is the 275ml Jack Daniels bottle that has a very close resemblance to a bottle of Coca-Cola in appearance, design and colour (ADF website).

The brightly coloured liquid within the cans and bottles, which is also used to sell RTD products, mimic those of popular soft drinks such as Fanta, Lift and Coca Cola, and again ADCA sees this as another tactic to entice young people to consume these products. An obvious example is the RTD – 'UDL' which is marketed in five different colours; lime green, purple, aqua, bright pink and bright yellow. These colours are likely to appeal to young people who are accustomed to drinking soft drinks with bright colours, however these RTD's do not provide warnings of the dangers associated with their consumption (ADF website).

The 2004 Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey which examined what various gender groups of different ages drank indicated that RTD's were most popular among the young male and female short-term risky/high-risk drinkers.

A 1999 Australian School Students Alcohol and Drug Survey, found RTD's were considered to be the third favourite alcoholic beverage overall, replacing beer and spirits as preferred drinks for older and younger girls (ADF website).

ADCA also believes the way RTD's are packaged, priced and sold as four and six pack items helps to encourage teenagers to buy them as it presents a more convenient and easier way to shop.

In preparing this submission, ADCA visited major alcohol outlets in the Australian Capital Territory and saw first hand evidence of specific stands selling individual bottles of Coke Cola and spirits, such a vodka and scotch, with a sign above it saying 'for your convenience get your ready to mix essentials here'. ADCA is aware that this is a recent initiative adopted by store management and believes that promotion and product placement aims to basically increase sales of full strength spirits using the Government's recent tax increase on RTD's as an excuse.

Taste

Another major contributing factor relating to the appeal of RTD's is their taste. An ADF study of adolescent expenditure on alcohol found 58% of minors reported taste was the chief factor in their selection of an alcoholic drink (ADF website).

It is commonly accepted that alcohol is an acquired taste. However, the high sugar content within many RTD's masks the bitter flavour of alcohol and has encouraged young people to consume ready-mixes which is a precursor to other alcoholic beverages (ADF website).

A 2002 street survey of Victorian children aged 13 to 17, conducted by the Centre for Youth Drug Studies at the Australian Drug Foundation, has revealed that children who spend their own money on alcohol spend over a third of their income on drinking.

The survey which saw 187 children in metropolitan and regional centres interviewed, demonstrated an alarming culture in Australia where children were spending a considerable portion of their pocket money on alcohol. The most popular products consumed were the ready-to-drink beverages, which were drunk by 46% of child drinkers (ADF website).

ADCA commends Lion Nathan and Fosters decision for recently announcing that they would reduce the alcohol content of their Ready to Drinks (RTDs) products to two standard drinks (Lion Nathan media release 20 March 2008). However, ADCA now believes its time for the alcohol industry to take notice of Australian community attitudes towards RTDs and become involved with identifying solutions to the problem (ADCA media release 20 March 2008).

What's the best solution?

The debate over the best way to solve the increasing problem of alcohol misuse in Australia continues to be high on the public agenda. There are a vast range of opinions relating to the subject, however ADCA believes the Government's decision to increase the tax on ready-to-drink products is a positive step to combat the part of the problem.

On behalf of the AOD sector, ADCA hopes that this Inquiry will provide substantive recommendations that lead to solutions, decisions and action to address the issues in question. Below are some initiatives ADCA believes have merit and should be considered as part of this process:

- Continued support, programs and funding from all levels of Government

Over the past three months there has been an increased level of Federal, State and Local Government support for actions to address alcohol misuse, in particular binge drinking.

This support is welcomed and ADCA believes initiatives such as the responsible service of alcohol, which recently became part of a mandatory training program for hospitality and bar staff in the ACT (ACT Government media release, 29 February 2008), as well as Darwin's recent decision to promote responsible public drinking in certain areas of the city (Northern Territory Government media release, 18 May 2008) should be commended and used as templates in other States.

In addition, Victoria's five-year alcohol action plan which aims to address the significant human and economic impact of alcohol abuse (Premier of Victoria media release 2 May 2008), and the proposed Federal Government National Preventative Health Taskforce, play key roles in addressing alcohol misuse in Australia.

However, for the long-term goals of alcohol misuse to be adequately managed it is imperative that the Local, State, and Federal Governments continue to liaise with the AOD and non-government organisation sectors, the community, and the industry to ensure adequate funds are ear marked to conduct comprehensive awareness, prevention, and treatment programs, as well as policy are put in place.

- Addressing the issue from a sporting perspective

Winning a football premiership and celebrating the achievement with a drink or two with your team mates has long been an accepted tradition. However, a Herald Sun article –'Drinking now a national sport' stated that 'a staggering 13 per cent of young Victorian footballers drank at least 10 stubbies of beer each time they visited their club. A third of them drank this amount of alcohol at their club three or four times a week' (Herald Sun 30 May 2007). This sort of association between sporting success and alcohol needs urgent attention, as in many cases it is often teenagers who find themselves in this, what is considered to be a 'right of passage' and culturally accepted situation.

In addition, many sporting clubs accept sponsorship from the alcohol industry, which in turn helps to boost the industry's profit and more importantly, promotes their products to young players. But it is not solely young sportspeople that are to blame for their behaviour, they are simply copying the actions of the elite and high level sporting codes which are broadcast across our television screens every weekend.

On 14 March 2008 the Prime Minister announced that the Australian Government would be working with six of Australia's major sporting bodies to help address binge drinking among young people. These include the Australian Football League, Australian Rugby Union, the National Rugby League, the Football Federation of Australia, Cricket Australia and Netball Australia (Transcript: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd: *Australia's top sporting bodies support the national binge drinking strategy*, 14 March 2007).

ADCA and the AOD sector believes this new initiative sets a good example of how key organisations and the Government can work together to tackle alcohol issues in Australia. While these partnerships will not solve the problem on their own, it will help to raise awareness of the issue in sporting arenas.

Another more recent example was the announcement of the Australian Football League (AFL) draft policy on alcohol. ADCA, as the national peak body for alcohol and other drugs, was provided with a copy of the draft policy and will be providing comment for consideration by the AFL prior to the release of its final document. As a result of this, ADCA's CEO, David Templeman, was interviewed by media organisations in relation to ADCA's position on the draft policy.

ADCA and the AOD sector would like to see more partnerships of this nature established within Australia. We believe these sorts of working relationships will help to strengthen the fight against alcohol misuse and more importantly continue to raise awareness about the dangers associated with excessive consumption of the drug to patrons within the sporting field.

- Encouraging the liquor industry to play a key role

The debate over alcohol misuse is not new, and over the years there have been a number of suggestions provided by Government, the AOD sector, and the liquor industry to deal with the issue covering taxation, restrictions on operating hours, and the introduction of warning labels.

While some representatives within the liquor industry have voiced their concerns over the idea of providing warning labels on alcoholic beverages, ADCA and the AOD sector encourage the industry to provide constructive solutions to the problem for consideration by all stakeholders.

In March 2008 Lion Nathan and Fosters reduced the amount of alcohol to two standard drinks in their RTD products. The fact that both Fosters and Lion Nathan recognise the problem and have shown a willingness to make their potential customers aware of the levels of alcohol they are consuming is to be commended. Hopefully this decision by both companies will be followed by others in the industry. Fosters and Lion Nathan, as a result of their actions, have helped to ensure that people consuming RTDs take a more responsible approach to how many containers they consume (ADCA media release 20 March 2008).

It's interesting to note that while Lion Nathan has taken this good citizen step, evidence shows that their annual profit of \$275million would indicate that their shareholders will not suffer financially (Sydney Morning Herald 21 May 2008).

- Liaising with clubs and hotels

ADCA welcomed the recent NSW Auditor General's Report in April 2008, which examined how NSW Police, the Office of Liquor, and the Gaming and Racing industry could work more coherently to reduce alcohol-related crime on or near a licensed premise (NSW Auditor General's Report – working with hotels and clubs to reduce alcohol-related crime, April 2008).

The report indicated that 'a balance between education and enforcement is most likely to help licensees comply with responsible service of alcohol laws and reduce drunken behaviour'. This means supporting licensees to serve alcohol responsibly, then taking appropriate action when offences occur.

More recently, the Steyne Hotel in Manly (Sydney, NSW) took an even tougher approach by banning the sale of RTD's from its bar and restricting bottle shop sales. The pub is ranked fourth on a police list of hotels reporting violence incidents in New South Wales. The Steyne Hotel at Manly says community concerns about excessive drinking and anti-social behaviour prompted the ban.

ADCA applauds the Steyne Hotels decision and believes it a significant step forward in the debate, particularly when a pub can show leadership in addressing the binge-drinking epidemic in Australia by enforcing these measures (ABC Radio Sydney, 11 May 2008).

- Law enforcement initiatives

ADCA supports the recent comments made by the NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione which calls for wide-ranging reforms in the areas of policing, licensing and treatment, to counter what he referred to as a "drink to get drunk" culture in Australia (ABC News 27 May 2008).

The NSW Police Commissioner suggests that alcohol-related crime is estimated to cost Australia \$1.7 billion a year, but the full financial burden, taking into account health care and other areas, could be as much as \$15 billion annually.

Mr Scipione also highlighted that an alarming three-quarters of all calls to police in NSW were connected to alcohol in some way.

The Commander of the Alcohol & Licensing Enforcement in the NSW Police, Joseph Cassar, has advised ADCA that the Northern Police Region, which takes in the licensed premises in the Newcastle and Newcastle West area have been making some positive progress in relation to alcohol misuse.

In March 2008, the Liquor Administration Board had placed a number of conditions on licensed premises operating in the Newcastle region, namely that after 10pm there would be no premixed drinks, no shots, no cocktails and only single measure of spirits as well as 3am closures/lock outs.

The results analysed by NSW Police to date suggests that there has been a significant reduction in alcohol-related crime in this area, particularly between the hours of 1am and 6am. It should be noted however, that Police operating in this area had executed a number of additional strategies to complement the conditions placed on licensed premises operating in this area.

ADCA would welcome the opportunity to work with the NSW, and other Police Services, to further develop some robust alcohol strategies to ensure that this important issue is addressed.

- Community

The Government's actions and the media's interest in relation to binge drinking and alcohol misuse in Australia have helped to raise community interest Australia wide on the issue.

ADCA believes everyone has the right to voice their concerns about problems caused by harmful alcohol consumption and the impact it has on their community and that collective action can send a powerful message to key decision makers that problems associated with harmful alcohol consumption are creating concern in the community.

It is considered that Governments, communities and industry need to work together to have an impact on problems related to harmful alcohol consumption. A recent example of this is in the Northern Territory where the Government is strongly committed to reducing alcohol-related harm in Alice Springs and, as part of that commitment, has developed the Alice Springs Alcohol Management Plan.

The plan responds to community concerns about anti-social behaviour and violence and builds on previous efforts to minimise the harm caused by alcohol. The plan contains strategies aimed at reducing harm, reducing demand and reducing supply. It contains measures that are being implemented and lead by government agencies to achieve these outcomes (www.aliceahead.nt.gov.au).

- Treatment/Clinical perspective

The Chief Executive Officer for Kedesh Rehabilitation Services, and Executive Board Member for ADCA, Mark Buckingham, who has more than 15 years experience in treatment and rehabilitation in the AOD sector, says that alcohol continues to be the most common, and principal drug of concern for which treatment is being sought.

Treatment programs at Kedesh integrate a range of services and therapeutic activities which occur in both residential and non-residential settings, illustrating the complex needs of the clients presenting to treatment services for alcohol-related issues.

Mr Buckingham says "with alcohol arguably more readily available through a variety of liquor outlets, and the increase of sales in pre-mixed ready-to-drink beverages (RTDs) it is not surprising that alcohol continues to remain the principal drug of concern for many clients and in turn services providing direct treatment programs."

Mr Buckingham also suggests that as a result of this demand, there is considerable strain on other vital community services which are affected by alcohol use in the community. His experience in the sector also shows that there is growing evidence that people diagnosed with a mental illness often engage in harmful problematic alcohol use.

From a treatment perspective, Mr Buckingham believes significant consideration and consultation within the AOD sector will need to occur in order to address the broad workforce development issues surrounding the treatment, and management of alcohol-related problems. This includes the development of education and training programs, increased funding, and more adequate staff supervision.

Previous submissions

Below is a list of the previous Submissions ADCA has provided in relation to alcohol.

- Submission to the *Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007*.
Submitted/Issued: 20 March 2008
- Submission to the *National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) – review by the NHMRC of the Australian alcohol guidelines: health risks and benefits*.
Submitted/Issued: 10 December 2007
- Submission to *Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) – initial assessment report. Labeling of alcoholic beverages with pregnancy health advisory label*.
Submitted/Issued: 2 February 2008

Conclusion and Recommendations

ADCA, on behalf of the AOD sector is committed to identifying solutions not only to RTD consumption, but the wider alcohol problems facing all Australians.

To do this, there needs to be a united effort from governments at all levels, treatment and prevention services, community groups, non-government organisations, sporting groups, industry, hotels, clubs, and the media.

The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy meeting in Melbourne on 23 May 2008, agreed that the Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs (IGCD) fast track a national report on solutions to the problem of binge drinking and alcohol related harm for the July meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). This report will focus on investigating lock-outs for licensed premises, mandatory responsible service of alcohol, controls on alcohol advertising and options to tackle the sale of alcohol to minors, all of which has a direct relevance to this additional facet of the Alcohol Toll Reduction Inquiry.

ADCA urges the Inquiry to acknowledge that alcohol and RTD misuse must be seen priorities that demand appropriate attention, and strongly recommends that:

1. a reform or review of the current alcohol taxation system be carried out
2. enforce stricter regulation of the promotion and marketing of designer drinks
3. ensure appropriate funding is allocated by government and industry to (a) enable the development of awareness programs, and (b) provide support for enhanced prevention and treatment services
4. provide more research into the relationship between designer drinks and youth drinking practices
5. increase communication between law enforcement agencies, hotels, clubs and the AOD sector in an effort to develop new alcohol strategies and ways to better manage the issue in the longer-term; and
6. initiate further discussions with liquor industry officials to encourage responsibility for the development and sale of their products.

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