

Submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry into Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007 by Mrs. Anne Bergen on behalf of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia Ltd.

The National Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia is part of a world-wide organisation with members in 35 countries. It has been in Australia for well over 100 years and was at the forefront of social change for women in the suffrage movement, and in establishing infant welfare centres and free kindergartens and better conditions for women in jails. In the past it pushed for changes such as alcohol testing of drivers and continues to be active in alcohol and drug education and working to make our society a better place for women and families. Its Mission Statement is: "To promote a drug-free lifestyle and Christian values in the home and community." We have members in every State and Territory of Australia.

The National WCTU of Australia congratulates Senator Fielding on his introduction of the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007. In recent years there have been a number of reports by organisations and government that have highlighted the problems caused by Australia's drinking culture, an example being the 2003 NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse, but such reports have not been acted upon by governments. The time for action is well overdue. It is encouraging that the new Rudd Government has now also taken up the challenge of trying to change the binge drinking culture. The Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill is a first step towards achieving this goal.

The need to reduce the alcohol toll in our society is well documented. For example:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics figures released 26/6/07 show that annual consumption of spirits has risen by 1.4% from 2.12 litres per person in 2004-05 to 2.15 in 2005-06 and there is a 9% jump in ready to drink spirits.
- Western Australian evidence by Dr. Tanya Chikritzhs of the National Drug Research Institute showed that "every new bottle shop opened in a rural area will lead to 32 assaults, and each new pub in the city will spark 17 domestic violence cases."
- In Victoria 3000 people a year are treated for the most severe forms of alcohol-fuelled brain damage. Another 97 are on waiting lists for nearly 2 years. Clinical neuropsychologist, Martin Jackson, said every year more than 200,000 Australians began showing signs of alcohol-related brain damage.
- People who have 12 or more drinks per day over a prolonged period destroy up to 30% of their brain.
- 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.
- In The Sunday Age, Opinion (10/6/07), Rob Moodie, professor of global health at Melbourne University's Nossal Centre said that there are now 5 times more young people being treated for alcohol-related brain damage in Victoria than a decade ago.
- 700 Victorians have died every year from their drinking. Alcohol is to blame for the death of a Victorian aged 16 – 24 every week.
- The 2004 Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey found 76% in the 16 - 24

year-olds had consumed alcohol at levels that posed short-term harm in the previous year.

- The Prime Minister was reported as saying that the estimated cost of the alcohol toll had doubled in the past 8 years to \$15 billion while alcohol-generated problems account for 80% of police work.
- Melbourne newspapers in recent months have highlighted the out-of-control binge drinking that is rampant and causing havoc on city streets at weekends.

There is a huge problem. But will Senator Fielding's Bill in its present form help to solve it?

1. Health information labels on all alcoholic products.

The National WCTU has recently made a submission to Food Standards Australia New Zealand supporting an application to have warnings regarding the possibility of damage to the unborn child if alcohol is consumed during pregnancy. We believe that this is a priority when placing health warnings on alcohol containers.

The National WCTU has also recently made a submission to the National Health and Medical Research Council supporting its new draft low-risk drinking guidelines. We trust that these guidelines will be accepted and they will need to be publicised and promoted. One way of doing that would be to have them on alcohol containers.

The Bill also mentions labelling with information about the unsafe use of alcohol, the impact of drinking on populations, for example aboriginal Australians, vulnerable to alcohol, and health advice about the medical side effects of alcohol.

This is all excellent but, I consider, not really practical. There is a limit to the amount that can reasonably be put on an alcohol container. Any health information labels would need to be in large, clear print and in a special text box so that it stood out. Graphics like those on cigarette packets would be good. Messages would have to be rotated and this is an advantage in that new wording or graphics are more likely to be noticed than if one warning is always there. The legislation would need to include details such as who will design and approve the health warning labels (Will it be the NHMRC, FSANZ, or the expert committee that will oversee alcohol advertisements?); how they will be rotated (e.g. 12 messages to be used for a month at a time); how will the labelling be enforced and monitored; penalties for companies that do not conform.

The effectiveness of health advisory statements on alcoholic beverage containers is almost impossible to assess. However, health warning labels on cigarette packets have been in place for many years and must be having some effect on reducing smoking as cigarette companies have recently been promoting a cigarette packet holder that will cover up the warnings. Similarly, companies producing alcoholic drinks oppose warning labels on drinks because they are afraid that they will be effective and reduce their profits. If

they really believed that warning labels were ineffective they wouldn't bother to oppose them.

Poisons are labelled. Prescription drugs are accompanied by leaflets explaining their effects and possible side-effects. Nobody would argue that these warnings should not be given because some people may not read them or may ignore the warnings. The same should apply with alcohol health advisories. The public has the right to this information.

Warning labels on their own will not prevent problems caused by excessive drinking of alcohol. However, they are one relatively cheap, simply implemented link in what needs to be a chain of educational measures.

The effectiveness of warning labels on alcoholic drinks in Australia obviously cannot be determined until they have been introduced and monitored over a reasonable period of time. Authorities in the USA apparently consider it worth continuing with such advisories after nearly 20 years of implementation.

2. Restrictions on the time of advertising alcohol on radio and television to stop alcohol being marketed to young people.

The National WCTU is supportive of this measure as a first step. However, real inroads were made into reducing cigarette smoking by totally banning cigarette advertisements and we would like to eventually see a total ban on alcohol advertising.

There are other forms of alcohol advertising that also need to be addressed, such as advertising at sporting events like the football and cricket that are televised during the daytime and viewed by children and young people.

There are also the unnecessary casual references to celebrating with alcohol, including getting drunk, that are constantly made by sporting commentators and radio presenters that build up the view that sport and celebrations and alcohol must go together. We need a law to prohibit such free advertising for the liquor industry that goes on at any time of the day.

3. Requiring all alcohol ads to be pre-approved by an expert government body.

Alcohol industry self-regulation of advertisements has patently failed as many ads violate the guidelines but the process to object to an ad takes so long that a new ad has replaced offending ones by the time an objection is looked at. Ads like the current "Pure Blonde" one that uses beautiful girls and idyllic surroundings plus humour are clearly aimed at young people and use sex in their appeal. The Shane Warne ad, like the David Boone one, also links alcohol consumption with sporting success.

It would be hoped that ads approved by the suggested expert body would take the glamour out of alcohol advertising.

4. Ban alcohol ads which aimed at children or which link drinking to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success.

If this criteria were currently enforced none of the alcohol ads would be permitted. We would definitely support it.

Another aspect of marketing to young people that needs to be addressed relates to “alcopops”, or RTDs (ready to drink) the attractively coloured, sweet, premixed drinks that contain spirits like vodka, whisky, rum, etc. and have an alcohol content of about 6% - 7%, more than in full strength beer.

Jill Stark, The Age health reporter (6/8/07) in an article entitled “Alcopops target teen drinkers”, reported the following:

Mat Baxter, a marketing executive behind vodka-based drink ‘Absolute Cut’ said that the market was booming for high strength, pre-mixed spirits that “get young people drunk faster”

He said that the RTD market, described by some in the industry as the “Binge Drinker” category – was dominated by stronger, 7% alcohol drinks with appeal to young people on a budget.

“It’s one of the few drinks where you don’t necessarily know you’re drinking alcohol and that’s a conscious effort to make those drinks more appealing to young people,” he said. “The drinks are very much about masking the alcohol taste.”

“Young people could buy 3 drinks with 7% alcohol and get the same effect for less outlay than if they bought five 5.5% drinks,” he said.

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.

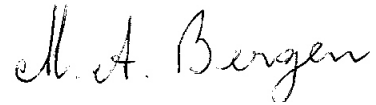
The above statements by Mat Baxter clearly show that the alcohol industry does market these RTDs especially to teenagers, despite official industry denials. If there is to be any real change in the teen binge drinking culture it must include measures to deal with these drinks. Short of banning them, which would be difficult now, it could include raising the price through taxes on them and legislating for a low alcohol content for such drinks.

The National WCTU of Australia supports this Bill as far as it goes. However, it needs to be part of a concerted campaign, such as the one the Prime Minister has initiated, to change Australia’s drinking culture. Mr. Rudd’s emphasis on sporting clubs, diversion of young people with drinking problems and a “shock” advertising campaign are all good but there are other steps that also need to be taken. Measures such as increasing the price of alcohol and decreasing its availability are less popular but have been proven to be more effective.

Another measure that should be introduced nationally is to make it an offence for anyone other than the young person’s parents to give alcohol to under-age children. This is law in NSW. It would help to reduce under-age drinking and make it easier for parents who do not want their young people to drink. Several years ago, Melton

teenager, Leigh Clarke, died after being given vodka essence by a friend's mother. His parents have been campaigning to have this law introduced in Victoria.

In conclusion, the National WCTU of Australia urges the Community Affairs Committee to support Senator Fielding's Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill and to consider including amendments to incorporate some of the additional points that we have made.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "M. A. Bergen".

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