



Drink must be tempered with informed decision making

WHETHER we like it or not, alcohol plays a significant role in the Australian community. Most Australians value the conviviality, the taste and the symbolism associated with drinking, and we are regularly reminded of the contribution alcohol makes to our economic landscape.

Many of us eagerly embrace the argument that we can drink for, as well as to, our health, conveniently ignoring the fact that evidence about the alleged cardiac benefits of alcohol is not clear cut. More importantly, by exercising a little more and eating more wisely we could accrue many of these cardiac benefits without the risks associated with alcohol.

Those of us who drink will be able to describe the personal benefits of drinking. Understandably, we might be less eager to identify the personal risks and potential harms to those around us.

Our enjoyment of alcohol is not without cost, but we just don't seem to talk about it very much. The uncomfortable fact is that alcohol is associated with a great deal of harm. More than 3000 deaths every year are related to alcohol use. In a recent 10-year period, every week a young Australian between the ages of 14 and 17 died from alcohol-related causes. In a single year about 70,000 people are admitted to hospital for alcohol caused conditions, while others are treated by GPs.

Extraordinary numbers of Australians are abused or assaulted by intoxicated people, and a substantial amount of police time is devoted to dealing with alcohol problems. This is a huge tax on our health and law enforcement systems and it increases insurance costs we all pay. The good news is that we can still enjoy alcohol, if we choose, and reduce the costs to individuals and communities.

The Salvation Army has argued that we are not sufficiently informed about alcohol problems and has proposed that alcohol should carry warning labels. This is an approach used in other countries, such as the US, Brazil and South Korea. It is hard to find fault with an argument that we should better inform consumers directly at the point of consumption. This sensible argument has resulted in Australia demanding that standard drink information is clearly printed on alcohol containers.

Tobacco warning labels have been most effective when developed by health experts and when they are easily identifiable as part of a comprehensive evidence-based program. Unfortunately, the evidence about the impact of drink warning labels is limited.

Where they have been used, individuals do seem to be able to recall the messages, especially when they are associated with other widely publicised programs such as drink-driving. But there is little evidence that in isolation they result in a change in drinking

behaviour.

This is not an argument against warning labels. But if we are to consider them, we should do so in the context of other strategies, where the evidence for effectiveness is stronger. There is excellent evidence indicating that we cannot increase the availability of alcohol with impunity.

The more easily available alcohol is, the more alcohol is consumed, and the more harm we all experience. Controlling the price of alcohol, the hours of sale, and who we sell alcohol to influences the safety and wellbeing of the whole community. The challenge for government is to manage the tensions between such controls, our enjoyment and safety and the interests of the alcohol industry.

Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity.

It is a drug with the potential for both enjoyment and harm. Responsible governments will treat it as such and will give prominence to the health and wellbeing of the whole community. The success of random breath testing is an example of how this can be done well. We also need broad public health strategies.

Developing and implementing a taxation system based on the amount of alcohol in a drink (that is, having higher taxes for more potent beverages, rather than taxes based on the type of drink wine, beer or spirits) will encourage the production, sale and purchase of lower alcoholic beverages and reduce overall consumption and associated problems.

Enforcing liquor licensing laws that forbid the sale of alcohol to intoxicated and underage people will reduce alcohol-related problems, support those in the industry who do the right thing, and hold to account those who do not.

We also need to question the unrelenting liberalisation of drinking laws that result in greater access to alcohol than to many other products. In concert with such strategies, we need to ensure that the community is well informed through quality education programs that provide the rationale for policy decisions. And this may be where warning labels might make a small contribution.

Perhaps we should also be asking for more nutritional information about what we drink. Packaged food includes information that can help people make informed dietary decisions. I wonder what the impact would be if we asked for the same information on alcoholic beverages? Will information about kilojoules help us make more informed decisions about what we drink and how much?

It is not unreasonable to ask that alcohol should be treated as if it has the potential for harm as well as good.

Steve Allsop is director of the National Drug Research Institute and a professor at the Curtin University of Technology