

EMBARGOED Media Release

Make alcohol health warning labels mandatory, say experts

16 August, 2011: Leading health experts are urging the Federal Government to make new alcohol health warning labels mandatory to help reduce the harms caused by alcohol.

The labels, unveiled today by the Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation (AER Foundation), include messages that drinking any alcohol can harm unborn babies, damage young developing brains and increase the risk of cancer.

The call comes as the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council reviews recommendations into alcohol labelling¹ and follows the release of the alcohol industry's vaguely-worded, voluntary consumer information labels on alcohol products.

The AER Foundation consulted with leading Australian health experts to create the proposed health warning labels. Other messages warn against drinking and driving, and the risk of injury.

AER Foundation Chief Executive Michael Thorn says the labels reflect existing international and Australian evidence that the most effective labels are specific, unambiguous, take into account the current NHMRC guidelines² and include a range of rotating messages.

“Consumers should be armed with clear information on the harms that result from alcohol misuse. International research on health warning labels tells us that they are effective in both raising awareness of health risks and changing people’s health behavior³. We need warnings as part of a comprehensive approach – but proper warnings, not feeble warnings that suit the drinks industry’s interests.”

Mr Thorn stressed that the labels need to be mandatory, government regulated and developed independently of the alcohol industry.

“Health warning labels need to be implemented and administered by the government, not the alcohol industry. All of the evidence says that alcohol industry regulation does not work.

“The country’s biggest alcohol companies will soon be using their weak, voluntary labels to direct consumers to ‘Get the Facts’ on an industry-funded website. But Australians need to get the facts now – at the point of purchase or consumption,” he said.

“What we propose supports the position set out by the National Preventive Health Taskforce in 2009⁴⁻⁵. We also support the approach taken in the Ministerial Council’s recent *Labelling Logic* report, chaired by former Federal Health Minister Dr Neal Blewett.”

The AER Foundation’s expert reference group includes: University of Western Australia Health Promotion Evaluation Unit Director, Professor Simone Pettigrew; Director of the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer and internationally recognised expert Professor Melanie Wakefield; Australian Medical Association Manager of Public Health Policy, Maurice Rickard; the AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research’s Claire Wilkinson; the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation Manager of Alcohol, Tobacco and UV, Brian Vandenberg; and the Director of the Centre for Health Initiatives at the University of Wollongong, Professor Sandra Jones.

A policy paper released today by the AER Foundation details the requirements of the proposed health warning label regime for alcohol products, including:

- That there be at least five health warning labels, including one specifically relating to drinking during pregnancy,
- Health warning labels should comprise both text and symbol. The labels need to be placed consistently on the front of the product and clearly distinguishable from the rest of the label,
- They should be implemented as part of a comprehensive public education regime, and
- The labels should be evaluated and refreshed at least every three years.

The AER Foundation is also calling for the inclusion of a full list of ingredients and a nutritional information panel on alcohol products to end the anomaly exempting alcohol from the conditions that apply to most other Australian food and beverage products.

The CEO of the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), Michael Moore said that clear and effective health warnings for alcohol were long overdue.

“We know that alcohol product labels are an effective way of conveying the facts to consumers at the point of sale or consumption. The design and implementation of health warning labels should be evidence-based and executed by governments and health authorities, not the alcohol industry,” Mr Moore said.

A recent community poll⁶ found that while the majority of Australians (62%) support health information labels on alcohol products, awareness of the specific impacts of alcohol misuse and safe levels of drinking remains low. The poll revealed that just over half of Australians (54%) are aware of the existence of NHMRC's Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol, while even fewer (12%) are familiar with the Guidelines' content.

The poll also found that while many Australians associate illnesses such as cirrhosis of the liver (88%) and liver cancer (69%) with alcohol misuse, far fewer are aware of the link with breast cancer (11%), and mouth and throat cancer (24%).

"We know that many Australians aren't aware of all the short and long-term health and social problems caused by alcohol," Mr Moore said.

Mr Thorn added there was also widespread support for the listing of nutritional information and ingredients on alcohol products⁷⁻⁸.

"This is particularly important given the high level of obesity in Australia, with an estimated 6.4% of adult males and 3.4% of females' energy intake coming from alcoholic drinks⁹.

"Consumer information labels on alcohol products should be amended to reflect the standards of other food products so that we can address misconceptions about the content of alcohol products," Mr Thorn said.

"Alcohol brands should also be banned from representing their products as 'low' in alcohol, 'low carb' or 'low calorie'. Such claims have the potential to mislead consumers into thinking the product has positive health qualities.

"We urge the Government to adopt this model for alcohol health warning labels to ensure all Australians have access to the facts about the potential harms of alcohol consumption," he said.

References:

¹Blewett, N., et al. (2011). *Labelling Logic: Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Accessed at:

[http://www.foodlabellingreview.gov.au/internet/foodlabelling/publishing.nsf/Content/48C0548D80E715BCCA257825001E5DC0/\\$File/Labelling%20Logic_2011.pdf](http://www.foodlabellingreview.gov.au/internet/foodlabelling/publishing.nsf/Content/48C0548D80E715BCCA257825001E5DC0/$File/Labelling%20Logic_2011.pdf)

²National Medical Health and Research Council: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/your-health/alcohol-guidelines>

³Wogalter, M.S. et al. (2002). 'Research-based guidelines for warning design and evaluation', *Applied Ergonomics*, 33, 219-230.

⁴Commonwealth of Australia, *Taking Preventative Action: A Response to Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020*, The Report of the National Preventative Health Taskforce, 2010.

⁵National preventative Health Taskforce (2009), Australia: The healthiest country by 2020, Technical report 3: Preventing alcohol-related harm in Australia: A window of opportunity.

⁶The AER Foundation-commissioned Galaxy study was conducted between 14th to 17th January 2011. It was a national online survey (excluding NT) and was weighted by age, gender and location (based on ABS population estimates) to the national population. There were 1,009 respondents aged 18 years and above.

⁷Kypri, K., McManus, A., Howat, P., Maycock, B., Hallett, J., & Chikritzhs, T. (2007). 'Ingredient and nutrition information labeling of alcoholic beverages: Do consumers want it?' The Medical Journal of Australia, 187 (11/12): 669. Viewed 4 May 2011 at: http://mja.com.au/public/issues/187_11_031207/kyp10914_fm.html

⁸Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (2009). Alcohol health information labels: Report of qualitative research into health information labels on alcoholic beverages. Carlton South: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

⁹Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997). Selected highlights, Australia, 1995, cat. No. 4802.0. ABS: Canberra, p.20

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Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation (AER Foundation): The AER Foundation is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Since 2001, the AER Foundation has invested over \$115 million in research and community projects to minimise the impact of alcohol misuse on Australians. Through our national grants program and commissioned research, the AER Foundation has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. We work with community groups, all levels of government, police, emergency workers, research institutions and the private sector to address alcohol-related problems. For further information visit our website: www.aerf.com.au