

PHAA & ADCA MEDIA RELEASE: 1 April 2011



Alcohol industry forum wrong to target young people

DrinkWise, a group established and funded by the alcohol industry, is hosting a 'National Youth Forum' in Canberra today. Leading health organisations have condemned DrinkWise for involving young people in what appears to be largely a promotional exercise while children and young people are exposed to massive advertising and sponsorship activities.

"DrinkWise is funded by the alcohol industry. Its website shows that half its Board members are senior alcohol industry executives. It is shocking that an organisation funded by the alcohol industry is involving young people in this sort of public exercise," said Professor Mike Daube, Convenor of the Public Health Association of Australia's (PHAA) Alcohol Special Interest Group.

"Promotion for the Forum claims that it aims to 'reflect on the culture, behaviours and alcohol consumption patterns of young adults', but it looks a lot like using adolescents to promote the image of an organisation established by groups that spend upwards of \$500 million a year on advertising and sponsorship to which children and young people are heavily exposed. DrinkWise claims to be 'independent' – yet its Board has representatives from producers who design and promote products for young people, as well as hotels and retailers. This Forum is a distraction from the measures that are known to work – such as tax increases, much tougher controls on access, curbing alcohol promotion and phasing out advertising and promotions such as sports sponsorship.

"The last people who should be telling us how to reduce these problems are the producers and retailers who oppose the measures recommended by health authorities," said Professor Daube.

"Even the phrasing around the event is disturbing. The aim is presented as 'finding a middle ground for Australia's youth drinking culture'. But there is no middle ground where health recommendations on drinking by children and young people are concerned. 80% of alcohol consumed by young people is consumed in ways that put their (and others') health at risk. More than half our kids think that drinking to get drunk is acceptable. The National Health and Medical Research Council recommend that, 'for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option'," added David Templeman, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA).

"A middle ground for Australia's youth drinking culture may suit the alcohol industry; but it certainly does not suit the health and well-being of our young people. DrinkWise claims to be concerned about drinking problems in young people, but when does this organisation call for serious and effective action that might upset its alcohol industry funders?" asked Mr Templeman.

"DrinkWise have also stayed remarkably silent about research they funded that is forthright about issues such as alcohol industry marketing to young people, and the key measures needed to curb drinking by young people, such as tax, curbs on marketing, and liquor licensing controls," said Professor Daube.

Mr Templeman added, "We know what needs to be done – and it does not include drinks industry PR activities. DrinkWise should call off their Forum, and call on their alcohol industry funders to support measures that will actually have an impact."

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