

National Liquor News – April 2008

New draft drinking guidelines don't stack up

Governments of all stripes hand out a lot of health advice to consumers, and alcohol consumption is no exception.

The National Medical and Health Research Council (the NMHRC) is the Australian government agency which funds medical and health research to improve Australian's health, and as part of that effort, it provides drinking guidelines.

Last year the NMHRC appointed an Expert Committee to review the existing Australian Alcohol Guidelines. The Expert Committee drafted new guidelines that drastically reduced the recommended daily limits for drinking, from four drinks per day for men and two drinks per day for women, to two drinks a day for both sexes.

The NMHRC sent out these draft guidelines for consultation and the alcohol industry co-operated to make the case against the new guidelines. Usually there is a period of informal discussion with the industry, but in this case the usual practice was ignored.

The industry had to firstly insist on a longer consultation period, rather than the bare minimum of 30 days that the Council initially imposed. The topic of alcohol's health impact is very complex, and the industry saw no good reason for the Council's rushing the new guidelines through the process.

The alcohol beverage industry has a lot of issues with the new draft guidelines. Firstly, the Expert Committee did not prove there was anything wrong with the old guidelines which had been in place since 2001. There has been considerable investment in publicising those guidelines, which will be lost if new guidelines are adopted.

Secondly, the purpose of the guidelines seems to have been shifted by the Expert Committee away from being simple and understandable advice for consumers, into being an analysis of levels of risk across a lifetime. The draft guidelines recommend the two/two drinks per day as being the level at which there is a 1 in 100 chance of a drinker suffering serious injury or illness due to alcohol across their lifetime. There are flaws in the evidence for this which I will discuss further, but advice on lifetime risks does not provide a lot of guidance for people looking to understand and manage their drinking responsibly during the next weekend or holiday.

The Expert Committee appears to have forgotten that the guidelines form a key part of the health advice given out by governments and other health agencies, and to shift the advice to being an assessment of risk across a lifetime knocks that purpose on its head. This is a mistake, unless of course the Expert Committee wants the guidelines to become the de facto daily limit because people misunderstand what the two/two recommendation really means.

Third, the reasoning in favour of the new guidelines was flawed and reliant on research papers that were written by members of the Expert Committee, and which had not been published.

DSICA commissioned Access Economics to review one of those unpublished papers, who found that data and methods used to arrive at the results were highly questionable.

Some of the points that Access Economics pointed out were that a lot of the data was from developing countries such as India, China, Mozambique and Mexico. Compounding the use of the wrong data, the risk modelling is based on a male body weight of 60kgs, and a female body weight of 50kgs. The Australian bodyweight averages are considerably higher.

The draft guidelines are flawed for several reasons and should not be adopted.