

Australia on road to flawed guidelines for alcohol consumption

Australia is on the road to adopting flawed guidelines relating to alcohol consumption and health following a decision by a key government expert committee to ignore Australian studies into alcohol consumption and risk and instead focus almost exclusively on data collected in developing countries and other high-risk environments.

This is according to a report produced by health analysts at Access Economics that exposes a significant lack of evidence-based conclusions in draft guidelines produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) relating to the number of alcoholic drinks men and women should consume to mitigate associated risk.

Access Economics Director and leading health economist Lynne Pezzullo said the data used to formulate the draft guidelines was not only highly selective but did not reflect a sufficiently robust evidence-based approach to guideline formulation.

“These draft guidelines currently rate anything more than two standard drinks a day as ‘risky’ for both men and women. The data and methods used to arrive at this conclusion are highly questionable,” Ms Pezzullo said.

“By not considering Australian alcohol consumption patterns, the local setting for injury risk, Australian age and gender mortality profiles, and by ignoring the proven health benefits of moderate alcohol consumption, the committee has produced a result that is both flawed and alarmist,” she said.

“While there is an important need to protect against the effects of excessive alcohol consumption, especially in high-risk groups, the proposed guidelines – due to the methodology applied in their development – provide little comfort that they will help realise this objective.”

The Access Economics critique of the report paper (*Determination of injury mortality risk by volume and number of drinking occasions*) used in the formulation of the NHMRC *Australian alcohol guidelines for low risk drinking; draft for public consultation (October 2007)* concluded:

- Key findings were based partly on data collected in a 12-nation survey of emergency room admissions which included mostly developing countries – notably Mozambique, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Belarus, South Africa, China and India. The risks associated with alcohol consumption are likely to be significantly higher in countries where there exists a lack of regulatory, policy and infrastructure measures designed to mitigate risk

(i.e., random breath testing, alcohol serving restrictions, effective policing and road maintenance).

- Much of the data used is derived from surveys of people in Emergency Departments. These people are markedly different from the general population and likely to exhibit higher risk profiles.
- There is a bias against males in the report findings due to a decision to ignore the cardiovascular benefits which are particularly important for males, coupled with the fact that males are apparently assigned an average weight of 60kg. As such, males are considered 'at risk' after two drinks per day (the same as females). This conclusion is out of line with other literature, not to mention common sense.
- The report does not include an analysis of Australian alcohol consumption patterns and associated risk – despite data being available from local sources. As such, the overall findings are inconsistent with an objective review of Australian studies and peer-reviewed published papers from countries similar to Australia.
- The report makes conclusions relating to lifetime risk of death without taking account of age or gender differences. This approach leads to generalisations that do not reflect Australia's mortality risk profile.
- The report assumes that an individual's daily alcohol consumption rate remains the same in perpetuity. This is unrealistic and more robust models could have been adopted.
- The report ignores an 'all cause' death and health-benefit approach, deliberately excluding the proven health benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. Although the cardioprotective and other beneficial effects of moderate alcohol consumption are listed in the draft guidelines (e.g. stress reduction and the prevention of diabetes, gallstones, suicide and dementia) they are ignored in the modelling.

Current well-formulated NHMRC Guidelines, developed in 2001, recommend that men do not consume more than four standard drinks a day or six drinks on any one occasion, while women should not exceed two standard drinks per day or exceed four drinks on any one occasion. Both men and women should have two alcohol-free days per week.

“The proposed new draft guidelines imply the majority of Australian males are at risk due to their current drinking habits. This can only serve to create a national health issue where one does not necessarily exist,” Ms Pezzullo said.

She added that the draft guidelines do not address the original motivation for the review, which was in response to concerns regarding foetal alcohol syndrome and binge drinking among teenagers and young adults.

“The initial intent of the review appears to have been lost. It is difficult to see how reducing the recommended daily consumption for men from four standard drinks to two drinks is going to reduce the incidence of foetal alcohol syndrome or binge drinking by young Australians.

“Similarly, there is a very real risk that any guideline of two drinks a day will lack credibility with the Australian public and simply be ignored,” Ms Pezzullo said.

“Acceptance of these draft guidelines would be a backward step as it would negate the past investment in publicising and building public knowledge of the current guidelines.

“What Australia really needs is an evidence-based education and intervention program for high risk drinkers – not new standards developed through a flawed literature review, modelling and guideline development.”

The Access Economics report was produced for the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia (DSICA), which has been working with government and industry groups on strategies to minimise alcohol-related harm through the responsible marketing, retailing, serving and consumption of alcohol. The Council has sought to promote moderate consumption of alcohol and reduce binge drinking by:

- Calling for a government-run education campaign to help parents find better ways to control teen drinking;
- Working towards the regulation of labelling and packaging of alcohol containers in line with current advertising standards;
- Financially supporting DrinkWise, an independent organisation working to positively shape the alcohol consumption habits of Australians; and
- Applying to Food Standards Australia and New Zealand for the labelling of alcohol energy drinks to be at the same standard as non-alcoholic energy drinks.

DSICA Executive Director Gordon Broderick said that in order to effectively change the negative aspects of Australia’s drinking culture, government efforts need to be evidence-based and adopted over the long-term.

“Australians of all ages need to shift away from episodes of heavy drinking to drinking moderately and responsibly. Education is the key,” he said.

“There needs to be more education programs in high schools regarding the way alcohol is metabolised and the impacts of excessive alcohol consumption, coupled with strategies to help young people develop safe, sociable drinking habits.”

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Media release issued on behalf of Access Economics and DSICA.

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