

National Liquor News - October 2009

Government responds to the PHT recommendations

In early September, the Government released the report of the Preventative Health Taskforce on obesity, smoking and alcohol (abuse).

The Labor government should be congratulated for looking at the long-term health of Australians, with the ambitious goal of making Australia the healthiest country by 2020. The report was the result.

The Commonwealth had wanted a report on reducing alcohol abuse. What it got was a report on the first steps to ending alcohol, using the tobacco model. The antipathy towards alcohol is very clear. It begrudgingly describes alcohol as “intrinsic part of Australian culture”. The report cannot bring itself to state some fairly obvious truths such as that people drink because they find it pleasurable, and it adds to the quality of their life. From this starting point, they could have gone onto a balanced discussion.

There are some parts of the report that got it right: improving the health of indigenous Australians, and improving the primary healthcare services for Australians who abuse alcohol or just want to cut down. Reducing the incidence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and supporting parents to reduce their children’s drinking and delaying the start of drinking are also important goals that are very worthy of support.

However, in the report’s view, alcohol advertising “intentionally promotes pro-drinking messages to the general population”. In reality, advertisements are promoting one brand over another brand, or one store’s prices over another’s. Much of the alcohol advertising does not show anyone actually drinking, and if it does, it is certainly not in a dangerous or irresponsible manner. The objection of the report’s authors is that showing alcohol at all makes it ‘normal’. And there is the fault-line between the report’s authors and the rest of the population.

A fine example of the weak arguments used by the report to reach the recommendations the authors want is how it uses some recent medical research showing the human brain does not become fully developed until around age 25, and hence more vulnerable to alcohol, to then argue for ending alcohol promotions that have a high exposure to people under 25.

Note the use of research in one area to call for new policies in a completely different area. Logically, the report should be saying that people aged under 25 should not be allowed to drink, but they can’t call for that - yet.

The report makes some obvious factual errors that seriously weaken its credibility. For example, it confidently states that the Australian Government collected \$3.5b in excise and WET in 2007-08, and sourced this figure from the Australian Tax Office. Unfortunately, the authors were wrong by about \$2b because they did not consider imported alcohol that pays excise to Australian Customs, not the ATO.

The Government has not endorsed the report's recommendations, and has gone into a period of consultation during which all interested parties can express their view. DSICA will be working assiduously to lobby the Government during this time.