

National Liquor News - February 2009

Preventative Health Taskforce takes the narrow view

Last year the Australian Government established the National Preventative Health Taskforce to find ways to reduce Australia's continuing problems with obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse.

The taskforce wrote a discussion paper on ways for Australia to cut down the number of obese people, smokers and alcohol abusers. Unfortunately, Australia has a very small number of alcohol researchers and academics, so the result was the usual collection of the usual solutions to the alcohol abuse problem – controls, additional controls and further controls.

The bias in the paper was strongly towards supporting what is called the 'Nordic approach' – alcohol consumption is harmful, therefore the less alcohol consumed per head overall the better, irrespective of the pattern, circumstances or by whom. Therefore governments should sharply increase the price, strictly control the number of outlets, reduce and eventually ban advertising and promotions, and reduce trading hours.

The problem with the taskforce's approach is that it ignores the reality that the great majority of Australians drink responsibly the great majority of the time, and that they find it pleasurable to do so. This adds a lot to Australians' quality of life, and does no appreciable harm. DSICA estimates that the industry will have a retail turnover on alcohol of \$17.6b in the coming year – obviously drinking adds to the lives of average Australians with that level of expenditure.

The abuse problems are largely concentrated within identified sub-populations and locations – roughly speaking, some of our young people aged 15-25, particularly young women, and in major entertainment precincts in some states, and in some communities. This is not to deny that some people abuse alcohol in all parts of Australia, and at all ages and of both sexes.

The point is that it is some young people, some communities, and in some parts of our major cities. The problems are localised, yet the national taskforce is overly-focused on nationwide solutions – tax increases and advertising and sponsorship bans, etc. Why should all Australians suffer for the problems caused in localised areas or in some easily –identified groups?

That is one of DSICA's major criticisms of the taskforce's approach - it ignores the role of the states and territories in reaching the situation we face. It is the states and territories that are responsible for liquor licensing and how it is enforced, for policing priorities, for what young people get taught about alcohol abuse in schools, for laws on secondary supply. States and territories also set budgets for drug and alcohol treatment, and give local governments their planning powers. The taskforce ignored the constitutional reality that Australia has a federal system and three levels of government.

One of the most annoying elements of the taskforce was that they fell into the lazy (and insulting) habit of talking about "industry" as if there was one single organised company that did everything from brewing and distilling, down to pouring the drink and collecting the glass afterwards. This mythical "Industry" was to blame for most of the alcohol abuse, and always acted in lock-step. This is far from reality.

A final criticism of the taskforce was that they relied very heavily on the reports of health economists that paint a grossly exaggerated picture of the cost of alcohol in Australia as being \$15.3b. The methodology and results of these reports have been severely questioned in reviews commissioned by the National Alcohol Beverage Industry Council.