

## National Liquor News – September 2010

### Food labelling review raises questions

The Commonwealth Government and the states have set up a thorough review of the nation's food labelling policies, and warning labels on alcohol products is an area that is being specifically examined.

Having a review every so often to make sure a system is working properly is sensible; it is always possible that improvements can be made. What is alarming about this review is while that food safety and labelling is very competently handled by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (or FSANZ in the jargon of government), there appears to be a lot of food politics being played out.

Industry is generally supportive of FSANZ because it trusts the science and economics-based approach it takes to making recommendations. However, activists of all types generally don't because FSANZ sets a very high standard for evidence of effectiveness. There is a great deal of pressure on the review team about alcohol warning labels because it takes alcohol one more step down the road towards being treated like tobacco.

There is a very good reason that Australia and most nations don't have mandatory alcohol warning labels – the evidence shows that they don't work in actually changing abusive behaviour. The science and the evidence are not on the side of labelling. However, being tough on labelling shows that something is being done, and at no cost to the government, only to the industry and thus the consumer.

DSICA members adopted voluntarily a drinking harm question – *Is your drinking harming yourself or others?* - because we wanted people to think about how they were drinking and was it harmful. That decision should not be taken to be supporting compulsory labelling of the sort recommended by the Preventative Health Taskforce.

FSANZ has not ignored the issue of warning labels on alcohol products; the organisation is – or was - examining pregnancy warning labels specifically, and warning labels in general at the request of the Australian government. But FSANZ's work has been halted while the review team goes through its task.

Why has an independent examination of the evidence on labelling effectiveness – which was due to have been completed and released last month – been paused while a politically inspired review is carried out and federal and state politicians then make the final decision?