

Open letter from leading health and community professionals to all members of the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council

Wednesday 7 December, 2011

Dear Ministerial Council member

We understand that the meeting of the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council on 9 December will consider food labelling issues, including pregnancy health warning labels on alcohol products sold in Australia.

As you will be aware the recent Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy (the Blewett report) made a number of alcohol-specific recommendations, including that 'a suitably worded warning message about the risks of consuming alcohol while pregnant be mandated on containers of alcoholic beverages and at the point of sale for unpackaged alcoholic beverages, as support for ongoing broader community education'.

You will also be aware of medical and community concerns about the impacts of prenatal exposure to alcohol. It is well established that alcohol is a teratogen that travels freely across the placenta and can cause nervous system damage and brain abnormalities resulting in cognitive and behavioural disorders in the affected child as well as physical growth problems. These disorders and abnormalities are referred to as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

The NHMRC *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* state that 'for women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking is the safest option'.

Health warning labels, combined with public education, offer an important opportunity to prevent Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

Alcohol companies oppose mandatory health warnings and instead propose adopting a voluntary system developed by the drinks industry-funded organisation DrinkWise, with weak warnings that are likely to have little if any impact. Survey results recently published showed that there is minimal public support for this voluntary approach in contrast to clear and explicit warnings.

There is sound evidence that labelling alcohol products with health warnings will make an important contribution to raising awareness about the risks of drinking during pregnancy. This measure is recommended by key health authorities such as the National Preventative Health Taskforce, the AMA, the Cancer Council, the Heart Foundation and the Public Health Association of Australia.

We are aware that there will be lobbying from the alcohol industry to delay effective action, or to adopt their preferred approach.

We urge you to take a leadership role in preventing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders in Australia by supporting the introduction of strong, research-based mandatory pregnancy warnings on alcohol products and at the point of sale. This is consistent with the recommendations of the Blewett review and health and medical authorities, and will have an important impact in reducing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders in Australia.

Yours sincerely

Signed by the following 64 leading health professionals and organisations

Ms Cheryl Bart, Chairman, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education
Dr John Boffa, Peoples' Alcohol Action Coalition, Alice Springs
Professor Carol Bower, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
Ms Jody Broun, Co-chair, National Health Leadership Forum and Co-chair, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
Professor Freda Briggs, University of South Australia
Dr Tom Calma, Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and founding Chair of the Close the Gap for Indigenous Health Equality Campaign
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Professor John Catford, Deakin University
Professor Simon Chapman, University of Sydney
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