

Warning!

Do not drink this article

Larry Lockshin

The label police are at it again with anti-alcohol groups working hard to add American-style warning labels to alcoholic drinks in Australia. I know many in the wine sector disagree with governments getting involved in this type of social engineering, but my experience in dealing with these interest groups while I lived in the US tells me it is likely to come to Australia.

This is part of the bad news. This article is about both good and bad news. The 'good news' is there isn't a lot of evidence that these warning labels have much of an effect on drinking behaviour. The rest of the bad news has to do with what we know about alcohol abuse and wine.

First, let's take a look at various techniques that have been used to try to reduce alcohol abuse. The largest experiment in the world, Prohibition, took place in the US from 1920 to 1933. Other countries including Canada, Russia, Iceland, Norway and Finland had shorter periods of alcohol prohibition. We know the results in the US: alcohol was manufactured or imported and consumed illegally and the number of deaths and injuries due to alcohol abuse did not decrease, while overall crime and violence increased.

Since then, other types of controls have been implemented, most of which centred on restricting the use and advertising of alcohol. Australia and many countries have limits on the times and places alcohol can be sold. There are also age restrictions on who can buy alcohol. These types of restrictions mainly transfer the time and place of alcohol consumption. When the 'six o'clock swill' was in force in Australia, workers gathered in pubs to drink as much as possible before closing time. Now, pubs and bars are open much longer hours, so people can find alcohol at most times. In places where it is restricted, people either stock up or drive to a different locality where it is available.

Geographic restrictions only work where there are no nearby places to obtain alcohol, such as in remote communities. Age restrictions do reduce under-age drinking, but for the most part these laws just transfer the purchase and drinking to more hidden places.

Two other major strategies have been used to reduce drinking. One is to raise the price of alcohol through taxes. Just like with cigarettes, this is not very effective, except in raising tax revenue. Those with low incomes suffer greatly but still drink, while those with higher incomes are not really bothered. If the taxes are apportioned differently across different types of alcohol, poorer people will gravitate to the biggest 'bang for the buck' and drink whatever has the highest alcohol content for the lowest price.

The other method of reducing harm is through sanctions. These have worked to a greater degree, but do not necessarily reduce overall consumption. Limiting alcohol consumption in public places, like during sporting events or in certain parks, reduces consumption in those locations. The strong enforcement of drink driving has reduced the number of alcohol related accidents, however, it has not reduced drinking. It has resulted in 'designated drivers', more taxi trips and increased drinking at home rather than in public places.

One more strategy to reduce drinking and linked to warning labels is a ban or restriction on advertising. Laws have been passed in various countries including France to reduce or eliminate most kinds of alcohol ads. In France, one can only show the bottle/brand and nothing else. These restrictions *do* reduce brand competition and even competition between types of alcohol, but they *don't* reduce drinking. The French wine sector has complained that prohibiting wine advertising has reduced wine drinking, but other alcoholic beverages have not suffered the same losses in consumption. Similar results occurred in Sweden and Finland.

Warning labels are touted by many of those wanting to restrict alcohol as a reasonable approach to reducing consumption, especially among those most vulnerable such as underage drinkers or pregnant women. The problem is that these labels have only a small effect, and that seems to be on those most literate and of higher incomes. It is hard to separate out the warning label effect from the effects of wider knowledge, parental control and professional advice (in the case of pregnant women). Warning labels do not deter those of lower income, the underaged or pregnant women. There has been some research on warning labels

on cigarettes that shows that the very graphic anti-smoking ads and warnings do have an effect, along with strong restrictions on public smoking and availability. These are not being touted for alcohol.

I often hear people say—and I once believed—that wine was not subject to the same level of abuse as other forms of alcohol. We used to cite statistics in the US that less than 3% of alcohol-related automobile accidents occurred under the influence of wine. Never mind that few people drank wine in the US back in the 1970s and 80s. Our own and other people's analysis of wine consumption in Australia point to the abuse of wine as alcohol among a range of consumers. This is the bad news.

Do we have abuse of wine as alcohol? Yes. Fortified wines and very cheap cask wines are abused by a range of people, including but not limited to those on low incomes. Our examination of an ABS survey of more than 6,000 Australian adults showed that bottled wine is also being abused. If we take as our measure of abuse, the regular consumption of over four standard drinks for men and two standard drinks for women, we found there are thousands of abusers of wine.

The two standard drink limit for women results in many more women than men being classed as abusers when they have their 'Chardonnay' after work. I used to think the two standard drink limit was set too low for most women, but after hearing Creina Stockley from The Australian Wine Research Institute present the evidence, I have changed my mind. Women are susceptible to health effects above two standard drinks per day.

The same holds true for what is classed as binge drinking. Binge drinking has been defined as five or more drinks for a man and four or more for a woman in a single drinking occasion. Today, many Australian wine bottles contain eight to nine standard drinks. If a couple consumes a bottle of wine during a Saturday evening dinner, then they are binge drinkers. Many people exceed this limit on a regular basis; we could measure thousands of binge wine drinking occasions in the ABS data.

So what does this mean? It means it is hard to be 'holier than thou' when comparing wine to other sources of alcohol. Wine may be abused less often than some forms, but it is abused. It may also be the alcohol abused most often by middle and higher income people, most of whom do not consider themselves to have any health issues related to alcohol. Those in the wine sector earning their living from making and selling wine have to recognise these issues with their product. We have to stand by the focus on non-harmful consumption of wine and be realistic when it comes to rule changes.

The Winemakers' Federation of Australia has been the organisation most involved for the wine sector with government and other organisations interested in warning labels and warning signs in pubs and clubs. We need to support the responsible use of alcohol and consider funding more research on the health benefits of moderate wine consumption. We all will have to walk the knife-edge of recommending moderate amounts of wine for better health, while trying to prevent the abuse of wine as a form of alcoholic beverage.

PROFESSOR LARRY LOCKSHIN is director of the Wine Marketing Group, Ehrenberg Bass Institute for Marketing Science, University of South Australia.

Designed and built by those clever people at JCS



Containment Solutions

The name 'James' has been synonymous with quality Stainless Steel Fabrication since 1971.

At James Contract Supplies we offer you the knowledge and expertise, in conjunction with ISO9001 Accreditation, to ensure that all your Stainless Steel needs, whether large or small, are satisfied.

We have an extensive Adelaide based manufacturing plant, plus the ability to mobilise on-site construction facilities for large volume vessels up to and in excess of 1,000,000 litres.

We offer full planning and design facilities.

Another feature is our capacity to manufacture High-Pressure Format Cavity Plate, not only for our own use, but also for other local and international manufacturers. Certification of this plate is available on request.



35 years is a long time in tanks!



OH&S Management System
AS 4801:2000



Quality Certified
ISO 9001:2000
QCC 515

Contact Mark Lewis – James Contract Supplies
Stainless Steel Fabrication Specialists

70 Francis Road, Wingfield, South Australia 5013

T +61 8 8268 1311 F +61 8 8268 7798 E marklewis@jamescontract.com.au