



March 2005

POSITION on HEALTH WARNING LABELS ON DRINKS' CONTAINERS

The Brewers of Europe, the voice of the European brewing sector, promotes sensible drinking and is opposed to the misuse of alcoholic drinks. Together with its Members, The Brewers of Europe has a proven track record of initiatives that form part of our ongoing work designed to combat misuse where it occurs¹. Any initiative should be judged on the extent to which it actually contributes to reducing misuse. Our experiences in partnership with other stakeholders indicate that targeted education is one of the most effective measures. On the contrary, health warning labels have little relevance to responsible consumers and have not been shown to deter the minority who misuse the product.

Empowering the consumer

Clear information is important, to provide individuals with the guidance to make better informed decisions about their consumption. In this respect The Brewers of Europe is committed to labelling beer so that it is clear as to its nature and the consumer is aware of its alcohol content.²

Health warning labels do not work

The Brewers of Europe questions the appropriateness of placing health warning labels on alcoholic beverages when there are proven benefits of moderate consumption. Whilst, in countries where they were introduced, there was some increase reported in awareness of, exposure to, and recognition of warning labels on drinks' containers, research has failed to demonstrate a change in drinking behaviour as a result of exposure to them^{3,4}. In particular, there is no evidence that warning labels are effective in preventing alcohol consumption by heavy drinkers⁵ or pregnant women.⁶

Beer can form part of healthy lifestyles

Beer, when consumed in moderation, as is done on the vast majority of occasions, can form part of a healthy lifestyle.⁷ Whilst inappropriate beer consumption has negative consequences, any initiative aimed at reducing misuse should concentrate on promoting responsible consumption rather than warning the consumer about the product per se.

Internal Market

In addition, any proposed initiative following a prescriptive approach should be scrutinised with respect to the fundamental principle of the free circulation of goods within the European Union.⁸

Education is key

In the absence of evidence that health warning labels are effective in reducing alcohol-related harm, regulators and industry should concentrate their efforts on other, more effective approaches that encourage behavioural changes and promote responsible consumption. Education targeted towards specific risk groups such as young people, pregnant women and drink drivers is the key to reducing alcohol misuse in the long term.

¹ See [Worldwide Brewing Alliance Global social responsibility initiatives](#)

² [Responsible Commercial Communications – Guidelines for the Brewing Industry](#)

³ Grube J.W. and Nygaard P. (2001). «Adolescent drinking and alcohol policy». Contemporary Drug Problems, 28: 87-131.

⁴ Agostinelli G. and Grube J. (2002). «Alcohol counter-advertising and the media: A review of recent research». Alcohol Research and Health, 26: 15-21.

⁵ Andrews J.C. (1995). «Effectiveness of alcohol warning labels: A review and extension». American Behavioral Scientist, 38: 622-32.

⁶ Hankin JR, Firestone IJ, Sloan JJ et al. (1996). «Heeding the Alcoholic Beverage Warning Label during pregnancy : Multiparae versus Nulliparae». Journal of Studies of Alcohol, 57:171-177.

⁷ Keil U. et al. (1997). «The relation of alcohol intake to coronary heart disease and all-cause mortality in a beer drinking population». Epidemiology, 8(2): 150-156.

⁸ Articles 28, 29 and 30 of the [Treaty establishing the European Community](#)