

1 October 2018

Hon Aaron Stonehouse MLC  
Chair  
Select Committee on Personal Choice and Community Safety  
Legislative Council  
By email: [pccs@parliament.wa.gov.au](mailto:pccs@parliament.wa.gov.au)

Dear Hon Stonehouse MLC,

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry regarding the impacts of alcohol on the Western Australian community.

Alcohol is often referred to as 'no ordinary commodity', and for good reason.<sup>1</sup> While many people enjoy a drink, alcohol is associated with significant risk of harms to the drinker and harms to others. The human, social, and financial costs of failing to effectively regulate alcohol are too great to leave to individual responsibility. For example:

- Alcohol use costs the WA community \$3.1 billion each year in policing costs, hospitalisations, road crashes, and ambulances.<sup>2</sup>
- In WA last year, an average of 15 ambulances per day were called out for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication (5,324 in total).<sup>3</sup> Many were taken to hospital, contributing to the burden of alcohol on our emergency departments and health services.
- Alcohol is a cause of cancer and is classified as a group 1 carcinogen, the same classification as tobacco smoke and asbestos.<sup>4</sup> Yet public awareness of the link between alcohol and cancer remains low.<sup>5</sup> If drinkers are not fully informed of the risks of alcohol, it is not possible for them to make informed decisions about their own drinking behaviours.
- The brain continues to develop into the early 20s. Risky drinking can irreparably damage the developing brain leading to problems with memory, planning and organisation, impulse control, and mood regulation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Babor, T., Caetano, R., Casswell, S., Edwards, G., Giesbrecht, N., Graham, K., & al., e. (2010). *Alcohol: no ordinary commodity - research and public policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Alcohol Think Again. Alcohol and Your Health Infographic 2017 [cited 10/11/2017]; Available from: <https://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/Resources/Alcohol-Use-Statistics>

<sup>3</sup> St John Ambulance WA and Curtin University. More young WA men requiring ambulances for alcohol than women. Media Release, September 2018. Available from: <https://news.curtin.edu.au/media-releases/young-wa-men-requiring-ambulances-alcohol-women/>

<sup>4</sup> Cancer Australia. Alcohol position statement. [cited 1 Oct 2018] Available from: <https://canceraustralia.gov.au/publications-and-resources/position-statements/lifestyle-risk-factors-and-primary-prevention-cancer/lifestyle-risk-factors/alcohol>

<sup>5</sup> Slevin, T., & Chikritzhs, T. (2016). Why is alcohol cancer's best-kept secret? *Addiction*, 112(2), 229-230. doi:10.1111/add.13640

<sup>6</sup> Bava S, Tapert SF. Adolescent brain development and the risk for alcohol and other drug problems. *Neuropsychol Rev*. 2010; 20(4):398-413.

The extent of harms to those around the drinker provide an urgent and compelling case for action by governments to regulate how alcohol is made available, taxed, and promoted.<sup>7</sup> Alcohol's harms to others include:

- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, an entirely preventable but incurable condition caused by the baby's exposure to alcohol in the womb<sup>8</sup>;
- Family violence<sup>9</sup>;
- Violence on the streets<sup>10</sup>; and
- Road crashes from drink-driving.<sup>11</sup>

Governments have important roles and duty of care in preventing these harms. The environment in which individuals operate, the prevailing drinking culture, and the way alcohol is made available need to support low risk alcohol use. A substantial evidence base is available to guide governments in regard to effective approaches to preventing and reducing harm from alcohol. Based on evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, the World Health Organization has identified the top three 'Best buys' for reducing the harmful use of alcohol<sup>12</sup>:

- Increase excise taxes on alcoholic beverages;
- Enact and enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising; and
- Enact and enforce restrictions on the physical availability of retailed alcohol.

Action by governments and other key stakeholders to reduce harm from alcohol should be guided by the 'Best buys' and other evidence-based frameworks developed by health authorities.<sup>13 14</sup>

Yours sincerely,

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<sup>7</sup> Laslett, A. M., Room, R., Ferris, J., Wilkinson, C., Livingston, M., & Mugavin, J. (2011). Surveying the range and magnitude of alcohol's harm to others in Australia. *Addiction*, 106(9), 1603-1611.

<sup>8</sup> Education and Health Standing Committee. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: the invisible disability. Perth: Legislative Assembly, Government of Western Australia; 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, P., Cox, E., Costa, B., Mayshak, R., et al. (2016). *Alcohol/Drug-Involved Family Violence in Australia: Final Report*. Canberra, ACT: National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, P., Pennay, A., Droste, N., Jenkinson, R., Quinn, B., Chikritzhs, T., et al. (2013). *Patron Offending and Intoxication in Night-Time Entertainment Districts (POINTED)*. Canberra, ACT: National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund.

<sup>11</sup> Road Safety Commission. 2016 Summary: Preliminary fatal and critical injuries on Western Australian roads. Perth, WA: Road Safety Commission, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> World Health Organization. (2017). *Tackling NCDs: 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

<sup>13</sup> National Preventative Health Taskforce. (2009). *Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020 – National Preventative Health Strategy – the roadmap for action*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organization. (2010). *Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol*. Geneva: World Health Organization.