

Pregnancy warning labels on alcohol products long overdue

23 November 2017: The six-year delay in introducing mandatory pregnancy health warnings on alcohol products has resulted in an estimated 450,000 alcohol-exposed pregnancies¹, but momentum is growing for State and Commonwealth Health Ministers to act when they next meet on Friday, with the West Australian Government calling for immediate action on labelling.

A decision on mandatory labelling would bring alcohol into line with prescription medications dangerous to unborn children that already carry forceful, prominent and easily understood health warning information.

On Friday 24 November, the Australia and New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Food Regulation (FoFR) will meet, for the sixth consecutive year since former Commonwealth Health Minister Neil Blewett first recommended the introduction of government mandated alcohol warning labels, to consider the current voluntary alcohol pregnancy labelling regime.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says that the delay in introducing mandatory alcohol health warning labels that promote health messages at point of sale and at point of consumption is endangering the health and lives of future generations.

“It is simply unacceptable that alcohol, a widely consumed legal drug that causes brain injury and birth defects carries no such health warning for pregnant women. Australian consumers have the right to be properly informed about products that are harmful,” Mr Thorn said.

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause irreversible damage to the fetus, resulting in a range of harms including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

FASD is the leading preventable non-genetic cause of intellectual disability in Australia and its impact on learning behaviour and health are lifelong.

Australia’s pre-eminent FASD expert, Professor Elizabeth Elliott, *Professor of Paediatrics & Child Health and NHMRC Practitioner Fellow* at the University of Sydney agrees that alcohol health warning labels are long overdue.

“Women have the right to be informed of the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Six years to consider this issue is an excessive delay that has endangered the health and lives of future generations,” Professor Elliott said.



Michael Thorn says that in the absence of any legal requirement in Australia for alcohol products to display pregnancy health warning information to consumers, the alcohol industry has been left to develop its own 'solution'.

"The current voluntary arrangements have been an abject failure, as the Commonwealth Government's evaluation commissioned in 2014 can already attest; a weak consumer information label with the alcohol industry's messaging hidden and hard to read. It's everything an effective health warning label should not be," Mr Thorn said.

In 2016 the Department of Health commissioned Siggins Miller to undertake a second evaluation of voluntary use of pregnancy warning labels, and it is this report that will be considered at Friday's Forum meeting.

A New Zealand study examining consumer awareness of pregnancy warning labels conducted by the Health Promotion Agency points to what that evaluation will most likely find. An online survey of 1,488 consumers found that the unprompted recall of existing messaging was only three per cent, and that 38 per cent surveyed misinterpreted the DrinkWise messaging.

"Given that the industry's DrinkWise warning information is unchanged, no more prominent, and no clearer or more easily understood than at the time of the previous evaluation, FoFR must task Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FZANZ) to immediately commence the process of developing and implementing mandatory alcohol health warning labels," Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn is available for interview.

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ⁱ The 2016 Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that 44.4 per cent of women drink alcohol during pregnancy. This equates to around 75,000 women per year (based on the number of pregnancies published by Australian Bureau of Statistics Births).

The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation's greatest preventive health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia.