

WHISTLEBLOWER CONDEMNS CSIRO PRO-ALCOHOL BIAS

23 April 2019: An Australian research scientist has blown the whistle on the CSIRO, criticising a “stupefying” pro-alcohol R&D agenda paid for by Australian taxpayers.

Dr Saul Newman’s criticisms are outlined in an opinion piece [published last month by the highly respected British medical journal *The Lancet*](#), and reported in [The Guardian](#) over the long weekend.

Dr Newman highlights the CSIRO’s long history of alcohol research which he says is in direct conflict with the government institution’s [mandate of furthering the interests of the Australian community](#).

Dr Newman spent four years as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the CSIRO working in plant genomics and research to improve grain varieties.

He cites historical and contemporary research projects to make the case that our premier science institution has made a significant contribution to alcohol harm in Australia using public funding.

According to Dr Newman, in the 1960s CSIRO scientists helped introduce the wine cask to the world while senior members of staff personally developed mechanical grape harvesters, “which catapulted cheap Australian wine into global markets, and single-handedly made \$2-a-bottle wine a reality”.

In 2016, the top CSIRO award was granted to a [project that developed gluten-free barley](#), used to produce beer.

“This apparent scientific triumph had, ironically, been spun out of a genuine and effective public health program to make gluten-free cereal: an otherwise admirable goal that had been entirely derailed by management, who sold out gluten-free barley to a German beer company,” Dr Newman said.

Announced in 2017, CSIRO is now spending [18 million dollars of public money](#) to help Wine Australia generate more alcohol.

There are clear ties between the boards of CSIRO and Wine Australia, and Dr Newman says their preferential support of alcohol is echoed by the CSIRO’s Executive.

“The Executive admitted that alcohol killed millions of people and that there was no safe level of drinking but, remarkably, stated that pro-alcohol research would continue at CSIRO because it enjoyed a ‘social licence’ in Australia,” Dr Newman said.

Dr Newman says this pro-alcohol bias is firmly cemented in the [Wine Australia Act 2013](#) and tax benefits flow into Wine Australia to [“increase the demand for Australian wine... through targeted promotion and marketing activities”](#).



Reflecting on the evidence of alcohol harm in Australia, Dr Newman says the CSIRO's pro-alcohol research is neither a good use of taxpayer money, nor a worthwhile scientific pursuit.

"Alcohol kills one out of every 22 Australians... While the alcohol trade costs each Australian between \$500-\$2000 a year through ordinary bills, hospital bills, injuries, time off work etc – costs that far outweigh any benefits from tourism or trade," he said.

"For a scientific institution to ignore such overwhelming scientific evidence in favour of an unfounded statement with no empirical support is a stupefying decision," Dr Newman said.

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is "shocked and dismayed" by the issues raised by Dr Newman, when there are so many urgent research priorities that are in the public interest.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says it is unacceptable to have the country's premier government scientific institution so conflicted by proactively supporting a product that causes death and immense harm, while CSIRO's vision is to 'unlock a better future for our community, our economy, our planet'.

"The societal burden from alcohol reaches \$36 billion dollars every year. Meanwhile, dedicated Australians across our social, family, community, justice, law enforcement and emergency services work around the clock to minimise the harm and help people impacted by alcohol," Mr Thorn said.

"It is flawed policy execution to have the CSIRO and Wine Australia collaborating to produce more alcohol, while other government departments are spending billions of dollars trying to contain the downstream harm caused by this research," he said.

Mr Thorn says it is untenable that the CSIRO preference pro-alcohol research when taxpayer funding could be used to have a positive impact on the health of Australians.

"The CSIRO must have a stronger 'public interest' test for its research decision-making, and should focus on health prevention which currently receives scant government attention or funding," Mr Thorn said.

Dr Newman and Mr Thorn are available for interview today and Tuesday.

Media contact:

Clare Ross 02 6122 8616 or 0429 291120