



STUDY: ALCOHOL WARNING LABELS DELAYED BY INDUSTRY'S TOBACCO TACTICS

9 June 2016: A new study has found that Australian alcohol companies have successfully copied tactics straight out of the tobacco playbook to block the introduction of mandated pregnancy warning labels.

With the Australian Government due to commence another review of the alcohol industry's voluntary labelling, the report's authors have highlighted the desperate measures employed by the alcohol industry to avoid the introduction of effective health warning labels.

The analysis of alcohol industry submissions, published in the scientific journal, *Drug and Alcohol Review*, has uncovered a number of absurd and inaccurate arguments including claims that alcohol pregnancy warning labels would lead to abortions.

The journal article, *Mechanisms of influence: Alcohol Industry submissions to the inquiry into fetal alcohol spectrum disorders*, was produced by researchers from Deakin University and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) who reviewed submissions made by alcohol industry bodies to the 2011-12 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs into Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) is the umbrella term given to the disabilities resulting from alcohol use during pregnancy, and health professionals have long advocated for health warning labels on alcohol products to address this issue.

Yet the industry submissions to this parliamentary inquiry revealed a pattern of behaviour typical of those adopted by other harmful consumption industries and which faithfully follows the methods used by the tobacco industry in the past.

The submissions from the Winemakers' Federation of Australia (WFA), the Brewers Association of Australia and New Zealand Inc. (Brewers), the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia (DSICA), the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI) and the Australian Hotels Association of Western Australia (AHA WA), consistently downplayed the risk of FASD, endorsed ineffective interventions, opposed effective action and attacked the credibility of independent researchers.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says effective government mandated warning labels are designed to inform and educate and are an essential part of a larger public health strategy.

"Leaving warning label regulation in the hands of the alcohol industry denies the public a key source of information at the point of consumption. The current situation suggests that governments are more beholden to the alcohol industry's financial interests, than to protecting unborn children," says Mr Thorn.

It is now more than five years since the Commonwealth Government's review on food labelling recommended in January 2011 that a suitably worded warning message about the risks of consuming

alcohol while pregnant be mandated on individual containers of alcoholic beverages and at the point of sale for unpackaged alcoholic beverages.

That recommendation was referred to Food Ministers, but a decision on mandatory warning labels continues to be deferred, first in December 2011, and again in June 2014, for a further two years.

In this time, the industry's voluntary scheme, has proven ineffective, with recent data showing that it has had no impact on increasing people's awareness of the harms or in changing their behaviours.

The most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey (2013) found that over 50 per cent of pregnant women consumed alcohol before they knew they were pregnant and one in four continued to drink, even once they knew they were pregnant. Of those who did consume alcohol, most (96 per cent) usually consumed 1–2 standard drinks during pregnancy.

In May, [FARE's Annual Alcohol Poll 2016](#) found that only 50 per cent of Australians are aware of FASD.

FARE has called on the government to have mandatory warning labels on all alcohol products by 2018 as part of its recently released Federal [Election Platform](#).

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says leaving warning label regulation in the hands of the industry is "as good as having no labelling at all".

"Political leaders should follow the advice of independent reviews and parliamentary inquiries and introduce mandatory alcohol pregnancy warning labels. We cannot say that we care about preventing children from being born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and then turn around and bow to the tobacco industry-like tactics and delay the introduction of strong alcohol pregnancy warning labels." Mr Thorn said.

Mr Michael Thorn is available for interview.

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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 preventative 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.