



IRISH MEDICAL
ORGANISATION
Ceardchumann Dochtúirí na hÉireann

**Submission to the Department of Health and Children on
the Introduction of Health Advice/Warnings on
Alcohol Containers and Promotional Materials**

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IMO Submission to the Department of Health and Children on the Introduction of Health Advice/Warnings on Alcohol Containers and Promotional Materials

Alcohol is associated with more than 60 acute and chronic health disorders ranging from accidents and assaults to mental health problems, cardiovascular disease, liver cirrhosis and certain cancers, including cancer of the upper aero-digestive tract, colorectum and breast. Chronic conditions more often affect older people while acute conditions are more prevalent amongst younger people.¹

In a study of attendance at accident and emergency departments 2003-2004, 28% of injuries were related to alcohol consumption, of which, almost half (45%) were in the 18-29 year old age-group.² 61% of those presenting with alcohol related injuries had consumed 12 or more drinks.³

Alcohol was considered to be a contributory factor in accidental death and suicide. 36.5% of road fatalities were alcohol related with highest rates among 19-34 year olds⁴ and research found 56% of suicides tested positive for alcohol, rising to 93% of suicides under 30 years of age.⁵

Alcohol is also related to unsafe sex, drunkenness and public disorder and interpersonal problems. Consuming alcohol during pregnancy increases the risk of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder yet 63% of women report drinking alcohol during pregnancy with 7% drinking 6 or more units per week.⁶

Ireland ranks among the highest consumers of alcohol in Europe.

- Alcohol consumption per adult (15 years and over) rose from 9.8 litres of pure alcohol in 1987 to 13.3 litres in 2006, peaking at 14.3 litres in 2001.⁷
- 28% of people reported binge drinking (consuming 6 or more standard alcoholic drinks on one occasion) at least once a week.⁸
- 53% of children (10 to 17 years old) report ever having had an alcoholic drink and among 15 to 17 year olds, over a third report being drunk in the last month.⁹

¹ Mongan D, Reynolds S, Fanagan S and Long J 2007, *Health-related consequences of problem alcohol use. Overview 6* Dublin: Health Research Board pp45-46

² Hope A, Gill A, Costello G, Sheehan J, Brazil E and Reid V 2005, *Alcohol and injuries in the accident and emergency department - a national perspective*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children pp15-17

³ Hope A et al 2005, *Alcohol and injuries...*p23

⁴ HSE 2006, *Alcohol in Fatal Road Crashes in Ireland in 2003...*p3

⁵ Bedford D, O'Farrell A and Howell F (2006). *Blood Alcohol Levels in Persons who Died from Accidents and Suicides*. Irish Medical Journal, 99, 3, pp80-83.

⁶ Barry S, Kearney A, Lawlor A McNamee E and Barry J (2006) The Coombe Women's Hospital Study of Alcohol, smoking and illicit drug use, 1988-2005. Dublin : Coombe Women's Hospital

⁷ Hope A. 2007, *Alcohol consumption in Ireland 1986-2006*, HSE – Alcohol Implementation Group. p5

⁸ Morgan et al 2008, *SLÁN 2007: Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes & Nutrition in Ireland*. Main Report. Dublin: Department of Health and Children ...p81

⁹ S. Nic Gabhainn, C. Kelly and M. Molcho 2007, *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2006* Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway and Department of Health and Children ...pp23-26

Irish consumers must be warned of the risks of alcohol consumption. The HSE have recently produced evidence of the association between various conditions and daily levels of alcohol consumption in grams of alcohol.¹⁰ International epidemiological studies also standardise alcohol exposure in grams. Health warnings should be clear and precise and labels should reflect alcohol gram content so consumers understand the actual amount of alcohol they are consuming.¹¹

Evidence from the Road Safety Authority highlights the need for explicit labelling/health warnings in relation to drink driving and because a considerable proportion of Irish adult calorie intake is in the form of alcohol, it is important that calorie count on alcohol containers is an important part of a weight control strategy.

Research shows that explicit health warnings on alcohol containers and promotional materials are a low-cost counter advertising strategy that can raise awareness of health issues and can discourage some from drinking while pregnant or from drink-driving.¹² However, health warnings can only be effective in altering behaviour if implemented in conjunction with a wide range of other measures to promote safe alcohol consumption.

Young people are particularly susceptible to alcohol promotion. Mass media advertising, sports and events sponsorship, merchandising, internet presence, electronic communications and point-of-sale marketing, “all combine to embed the young-person in a network of pro-drinking stimuli”.¹³ In Ireland the drinks industry spends approximately €50m on advertising¹⁴ and are the major sponsors of festivals and sporting events.¹⁵ The IMO have been warning against the dangers of alcohol since the 1980’s and has clear policy on the promotion of alcohol to young people.

Recommendations

Health Warnings and Labelling

- Introduce explicit government health warnings on alcoholic beverages (motion 89/69) including warnings on the dangers of drink-driving
- introduce gram of alcohol and calorie content labelling on all alcohol beverage containers (motion 08/23)
- legislate for mandatory health warning labelling of alcohol products in respect of pregnancy and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (motion 07/16)

¹⁰ Hope A. 2008, Alcohol Related Harm in Ireland. Health Service Executive – Alcohol Implementation Group

¹¹ Hope A. 2009, A Standard Drink in Ireland: What Strength? Health Service Executive – Alcohol Implementation Group

¹² Stockwell T. 2006 A Review of Research into the Impacts of Alcohol Warning Labels on Attitudes and Behaviour, Centre for Addictions Research of BC University of Victoria British Columbia, Canada...p7-8

¹³ BMA Board of Science 2009 Under the Influence – The Damaging Effect of Alcohol Marketing on Young People p 21

¹⁴ Foley A. 2007, Purchase of Inputs by the Drinks Industry - A Report Commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland, Dublin : DIGI ..p14

¹⁵ Foley A. 2008 The Economic Contribution of the Drinks Industry - Commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland, Dublin : DIGI ..p44

Promotion of alcohol to Young People

- prohibit alcohol sponsorship of sporting activities and sporting organisations (motion 09/16)
- ban the promotion or sponsorship of concerts by alcohol companies where the attendance will include people under 18 years of age (motion 06/21)
- legislate so that a pre 9pm watershed ban on alcohol advertising on Irish television is brought in (motion 05/39)
- abolish all advertisement for alcohol in cinemas other than when a film with an 18 plus cert is shown and at other events where under-18 year olds attend (motion 04/23)

Other Recommendations

- immediately reduce the drink driving limit to 50mg% (motion 09/17)
- introduce mandatory drug and alcohol screening from drivers in any crash where there is a person injured or killed (motion 09/18)
- prohibit below cost selling of alcohol (motion 09/19)
- introduce a traceability mechanism to be put in place so that alcohol sold in off-licences to underage persons can be traced (motion 08/21)
- introduce a minimum pricing structure for alcohol (motion 08/24)
- bring in a sliding scale of alcohol taxes with the lowest tax on low alcohol beer and the highest tax on spirits (motion 08/25)
- implement the recommendations of the two reports of the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol (motion 05/37)