



Please note: Not for publication or broadcast before 0500 EST March 16, 2012

Alcohol advertising to be brought to account by new review board

Leading health campaigners today launched a new national body to review alcohol advertising in Australia to counter the out of control advertising and marketing of alcohol, which is seeing increasing levels of alcohol-related harm.

The Alcohol Advertising Review Board will consider and adjudicate complaints from the community about alcohol advertising, providing an independent alternative to Australia's current inadequate and ineffective advertising self-regulation system.

The Board is a world-first and is an initiative of the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth (MCAAY) and Cancer Council Western Australia and is supported by major health groups across Australia.

The Board was launched by children's health advocate and former Australian of the Year Professor Fiona Stanley who will chair the Board

"The alcohol industry has had a free run with advertising and marketing for too long, and alcohol promotion is virtually uncontrolled," said Professor Mike Daube, Director of the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth and spokesperson for the Public Health Association of Australia.

"The industry-based Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) is absolutely inadequate when it comes to reining in the industry's promotional activities. The code is voluntary, does not cover all forms of advertising or all alcohol advertisers, does not address issues such as placement, and has no powers to penalise advertisers that breach the code – in short, it's useless," he said.

The Alcohol Advertising Review Board has been developed in response to these concerns, and to provide a transparent, independent adjudication system for alcohol advertising.

Professor Stanley said children needed protection from alcohol promotion and advertising.

"Children and young people are being exposed to promotion of alcohol in advertising, in sport, on billboards, on buses, in bus shelters – almost wherever they look. The community, and parents in particular, are rightly concerned at the tsunami of alcohol promotion to which our children are exposed," Professor Stanley said.

"When we are seeing increasing numbers of children drinking to get drunk, as we are now – it is time to act. This Board is a great addition to the various activities aimed at reducing the huge trauma alcohol causes in our youth."

Cancer Council WA Director Education and Research, Terry Slevin said alcohol contributed to about 5,000 new cancers in Australia each year.

“Too many public debates on alcohol stop at the unhelpful conclusion that the Australian ‘drinking culture’ is the problem. That drinking culture is no accident. It is deliberately and carefully created by the way alcohol is advertised and marketed by the industry. This initiative is about confronting those marketing practices,” Mr Slevin said.

“The industry has failed dismally to responsibly control its own marketing and advertising practices. It is time that responsibility was taken from them and they were subject to independent scrutiny – this new board will do that.”

The initiative has the support of the Australian Medical Association (AMA).

“Currently, there are no serious constraints on alcohol promotion. The Australian Medical Association believes that the alcohol industry’s self-regulation of advertising has failed demonstrably, and there is not the faintest chance that their system will ever work effectively,” said Professor Geoff Dobb, AMA Federal Vice-President

“This board will also highlight the fact that more action is needed to pull the alcohol industry into line. We believe that it is time for government to act and apply regulations to the promotion and marketing of alcohol where the industry itself has failed,” he said.

The Content Code to be used by the new board uses only provisions from existing alcohol advertising codes from jurisdictions with regulatory systems similar to Australia’s, including New Zealand, the UK and Canada.

“The alcohol and advertising industries in these countries have supported the application of these codes to their advertising; so we will use codes accepted by the industry either here or in similar countries to judge their advertising content,” Professor Daube said.

“The new Alcohol Advertising Review Board will offer the community the opportunity to register their concerns on the basis of sensible codes, processes independent of the drinks industry, and speedy adjudication.

“We know that the alcohol industry spends hundreds of millions of dollars promoting its products – some specially designed to be attractive to young people. Our aim is that by shining a light on the worst of alcohol promotion we can bring about some of the changes that the industry will not make without public naming and shaming,” Professor Daube said.

The public can direct complaints about alcohol advertising and promotion to www.alcoholadreview.com.au.

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