

What's not on the bottle? Alcohol labelling in Europe

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Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to support the lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. All of the seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. These events provide the chance for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme for the seminars is "Alcohol, Europe and the World". Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Skar began her talk by providing a brief history of Eurocare. Eurocare was established in 1990 with membership from nine countries, including the UK. Today, there are sixty member organisations, from twenty five countries, and a central secretariat based in Brussels. The main goals of Eurocare are to lobby European Institutions to raise awareness and make sure alcohol remains firmly on the agenda; and to promote the development and implementation of evidence-based policies. Eurocare are partners in a range of European projects with a main role of dissemination of information.

At European level, food labelling, which covers alcohol, is a challenging area and there is not a lot of interest in it among the alcohol policy community. In 2011, a mandatory nutrition declaration was made for all food and drink products. However, following significant industry lobbying, alcohol products were excluded. Member states do have the choice to legislate on their own terms if they wish and introduce labelling for products with 2% or more volume. Skar explained that in December 2014, the European Commission should have published a report on nutrition labelling for alcohol products but that this has yet to be delivered. According to Skar, there were a number of reasons for the failure of the legislation in 2011. These included a lack of a sound evidence base of health harms; the burden for small producers would be significant; the persistence of 'alcohol has nothing in it' rhetoric; and arguments that alcohol is different and so should rightly be excluded.

There is a clear evidence base to support health-related information on labels for alcohol products. Calories from alcohol make a significant contribution to overall levels of calorie intake. In the UK, alcohol accounts for nearly 10% of the total energy/calories consumed for drinkers¹. Given this significant level, as consumers, Skar argued, we have a right to know what is in the products we are consuming and the calorie content of those products. Some progress has been made. In 2012, it became

mandatory for details of all allergens within alcohol products to be shown on the label. Furthermore, evidence from a recent Eurobarometer² public opinion survey shows high levels of support for calorie information on alcohol product labels. Some 70% of people surveyed supported the idea. Crucially, Skar contended that such high levels of public support could be used as an important lever for political action and support. Health-related information helps to remind consumers about the dangers and health risks from consuming the product; it can help change perceptions of risk and change long-term attitudes; and can lead to actual behaviour change overtime. These are important lessons we can draw from other products and take forward.

Skar outlined Eurocare's main recommendations for action in relation to labelling. Health information on containers of all alcoholic beverages should be mandatory. Labels should also contain information on product ingredients, allergens, nutritional information such as calorie content, and alcoholic strength. This information should also be placed in a standard location on containers, should be clearly separate from other information on the product and should be written in a sufficiently large font size and bold text. For greater impact, such information should be regularly revised to ensure the messages remain fresh and attractive to consumers. The current industry preference for information on underage drinking,

pregnancy warnings and drink-driving does not go far enough.

Overall, Eurocare believes that alcohol labelling in Europe deserves to be more prominent in the field of European alcohol policy. Skar believes that there is significant potential for change. The current legislative environment offers an opportunity for dissemination of health information at the point of sale and consumption. Health-related information on alcohol product labels would contribute to a paradigm shift which would be an important first step in awareness raising, increasing knowledge and changing perceptions of risk associated with alcohol. Nevertheless, important questions remain to be answered about how consumers respond to health messaging and which mechanisms for implementing alcohol labelling policies would be most effective. Going forward, understanding and answering these questions will be crucial.

Discussants began the conversation by arguing that there are important parallels which can be drawn and lessons learned from the tobacco industry. It was argued that rather than focusing on changing behaviour, which was deemed to be largely unachievable, we should form realistic and measurable goals. We need to think carefully about what we want to evaluate. For example, do we want to evaluate opinions, unintended consequences, or the impact of different types of labels? Being clear about our aims is fundamentally important for influencing the policy decision making process and provides clear direction for taking action forward.

An audience member raised the issue of human rights and suggested that this could be used as a frame when arguing for mandatory health labelling. As consumers, we have a right to make an informed choice about the products we buy and consume, even if it is the wrong choice. As such we can question how much right the industry has to keep such information a secret. However, another participant

stressed that the alcohol industry is not monolithic. There is a big difference between small cottage industry-type businesses and large multi-national corporations. We need to be clear about messaging, what we are trying to achieve, and who we are trying to work with. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective.

Another discussant raised the point that, although public health advocates have a preference for mandatory rather than voluntary regulation, we need to argue in favour of any expansion of information giving. The example of the producers of Tennent's lager (C&C Ltd.) deciding to display calorie information on all product labels was raised as an interesting example of what happens when one producer or sector within the industry (in this case beer) breaks ranks. The discussant argued that this has the potential effect of making the position of other sectors, such as the wine industry who are stringently opposed to health information labelling, untenable and this could force change from within.

One person argued that the no drinking in pregnancy warnings favoured by industry have been deemed largely effective as they are predominantly read by non-pregnant people. It was also argued that people do not want to read that alcohol is bad for them and often, as a result, shock tactics will be ineffective. Defining what information with regards to health labelling will be effective is very complex and dependent on the individual reading the information.

Skar concluded her talk by raising the dilemma of how public health advocates counteract the effect of high levels of spending on advertising by the alcohol industry. Adverts are very powerful and in public health we will need similarly powerful tools to effectively counteract their influence.

[1] Bates B, Alison Lennox in Obesity and alcohol; an overview (2012) National Obesity Observatory, NHS

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

Forthcoming Occasionals

Our next events in the current series of Alcohol Occasionals will be:

Additional Occasional: Advising pregnant women about alcohol – experiences from cross-cultural research

Lisa Scholin, Institute for Social Marketing, University of Stirling
Tuesday, 5th April 2016.

Adolescent binge drinking in Chile: Does it matter which school they go to?

Francisca Maria Roman, University College, London
Tuesday, 14th June 2016

These events are popular and places are limited. We need you to confirm if you would like to attend. You can do this by registering via EventBrite through our website at www.shaap.org.uk/events.html