



My View

How might the Australian wine sector respond to cancer scares?

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Introduction and recent developments

My first awareness of the impending emphasis on the cancer risk of alcohol was in a news item in January 2023 regarding cancer warning labels on alcohol from CBC Canada. This followed the release of a Guidance on Alcohol and Health¹ (see numbered references) updating 2011 guidelines. This report stated that no amount of alcohol is safe, as *alcohol is a carcinogen*, and consuming more than two drinks



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a week is risky. This is a drastic shift from previous guidance, reflecting thousands of studies in the last decade

that link even small amounts of alcohol to seven types of cancer including breast, colorectal and oral. Three to six standard drinks a week are associated with a “moderate” risk of cancer.

This prompted me to write a Letter to the Editor article for the *Grapegrower & Winemaker*, published in March 2023, about the issue of cancer, alcohol and labelling. This piece was entitled ‘Might alcohol follow tobacco’. The article referred to the recent Canadian health warning, and the February 2021 European Commission ‘Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan’ with a target of reducing per capita alcohol consumption

by 10 per cent by 2025. Cancer is the most common cause of alcohol-related deaths at 29% in the EU. The Irish Government declared in January 2023 an intention to use warning labels on alcohol, where wine is the second favourite beverage. Australian wine is among the top three favoured countries of origin by Irish consumers.

There have been more local developments in the last weeks. A *Sydney Morning Herald* article² on October 19 entitled 'Cancer warnings could be coming to wine bottle and beer can labels'. The article describes the federal government seeking advice on public awareness options after medical groups launched a bid for cancer and other health warnings on alcoholic beverage labels. The Australian government recognises the importance of labelling to raise consumer awareness of alcohol-related harms stated Ged Kearney, the Assistant Minister for Health.

The same article referred to the World Health Organisation (WHO) statement³ that there was *no safe amount of alcohol*,

or proven benefits that are not offset by harms. WHO defines alcohol as "a toxic, psychoactive, and dependence-producing substance and has been classified as a highest risk Group 1 carcinogen, which also includes asbestos, radiation and tobacco. It causes seven types of cancer including the most common types such as bowel cancer and female breast cancer". Further, "alcohol causes cancer through biological mechanisms as ethanol breaks down in the body".

How is the sector responding to this situation?

To date I have not seen any public comment by industry organisations on this disturbing development, so their response is unknown, perhaps it will be part of the forthcoming 'One Sector Plan'? The implications are clear that the national and international markets will be affected by statements such as the above, and especially by cancer warning labels on bottles.

Are there alternative views regarding alcohol from wine and health? An indication of this is provided by a very recent report featured in *Daily Wine News* on 24 October, written by Felicity Carter⁴ for the American *Wine Business News*. The article had the title 'Wine industry fires back against the WHO's Zero Safety'. This was a report on a congress on Lifestyle, Diet, Wine and Health held recently in Toledo, Spain. The congress was organised by the Wine Information Council (WIC)⁵ and FIVIN⁶, both organizations sympathetic to the wine industry, and under the patronage of OIV and several wine producer organisations of Europe. This was a conference designed to give an alternate view of the medical science, and to attack the WHO. There was support for the "J" curve by speakers indicating that people who drink "moderate" amounts of alcohol have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of human death globally.



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Australian speaker Dr Creina Stockley, a renowned pharmacologist and co-director of International Scientific Forum on Alcohol Research⁷ (ISFAR) stated that, “moderate consumption of alcohol has clear health benefits, and that’s something that Governments need to be reminded about”.

Confused? You are meant to be!

This represents the typical beginning of the information and misinformation wars that are contested in the media to sway public and hopefully government opinion. These wars are usually fought between two sides, one representing traditional medical groups and public health officials, and the other organisations of alcohol producers and their supporters, the latter hiding behind other names and acronyms like WIC, FIVIN and ISFAR suggesting credible even scientific backgrounds.

For those readers old enough to remember such was the battle played out over the issue of smoking, public health and cancer from the 1960s onwards, with an eventual win for public health and labelling and restrictive prices for tobacco products. This particular tussle is currently entering another phase of gangland warfare in Melbourne as criminal groups are fighting for control of the illicit tobacco trade. There has similarly been a more recent information/misinformation battle between the fossil fuel producers and protestors and governments concerned about climate change.

This type of misinformation battle appears to be the likely future outcome for the Australian wine industry as well, and the recent Toledo conference may well be a forerunner of such events in Australia, maybe even to include sessions at the Wine Industry Technical Conferences and other meetings? It seems very likely that there will be increased debate about the existence or not of “no safe level” of consumption as opposed to the “J shaped curve”, as there will also be about supposed benefits of the “Mediterranean diet” and cardiovascular disease and cancer. The 2020 publication ‘Alcohol and Cancer in the WHO European region: an appeal for better prevention’⁸ challenges the above suppositions. Occasionally the health officials fight back about

misinformation, as did the Canadian public health scientists about ISFAR in 2016⁹.

What is not in doubt is that the question of “drinking in moderation” is terminology that leads to confusion. The recent Canadian health warnings suggest that 3-6 standard drinks per week, a consumption level which many might regard as “moderate” is associated with a “moderate risk” of cancer including breast and colon. “Moderate” consumption is the present stance of the Australian Wine Industry¹⁰ including tasting room suggested pour volumes. Note Australian wine now carries pregnancy health warnings.

Alcohol in the human body¹¹

Ingested alcohol is mostly metabolised in the liver, and the primary metabolite is acetaldehyde due to the action of enzymes ADH, CYP2E1 and catalase. Acetaldehyde is a big problem for the human body; it is a *known carcinogen*, but fortunately is short lived, and is broken down to less toxic acetate. Some alcohol metabolism also occurs in other tissues including the pancreas, the brain, and the gastrointestinal tract. Acetaldehyde is also produced from alcohol by known oral fungi (*Candida*, thrush) and bacteria (*Streptococcus*, *Neisseria*) among microflora in the mouth, and this conversion is acknowledged as a cause of oral and neck cancers.

I am personally aware of the alcohol and health issue because I have had several such oral and neck cancers from the 1980s until the present; I had not suspected alcohol as a cause until I read the Canadian report. Despite multiple occurrences and medical treatment in three countries, I was never alerted to this possibility by medical people, who are more generally involved in treatment than prevention. Since I began my involvement in the industry in 1965, I have been a “moderate” consumer, I even made from grapes on my Barossa vineyard in the 1970s.

What of the future?

Readers who were unaware of the gravity of recent developments will be concerned, especially given the current over-supply situation in the sector, sadly brought about by industry

miscalculations of the mid-1990s. Some readers working with wine might be more mindful of their own health; I recently gave a presentation to final year wine students at Melbourne Polytechnic on this subject, warning of the occupational hazard of wine consumption. Wine producers may also be concerned for wine consumers’ health.

One possible glimmer of hope I have learned since asking Google about this topic is the possibility to ameliorate oral acetaldehyde levels by use of mouthwashes or medications to treat some oral microbes. Asian Flush¹² is a condition affecting around 10% of Asian persons on drinking alcohol, causing their faces to become red; this is an acknowledged allergic reaction to acetaldehyde. There are pills¹³ one can use to avoid this reaction, giving some hope of other treatments being developed in the future, hopefully a preventative mouthwash free of any taste and odour for use in wine tasting.

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