

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Might alcohol follow tobacco?

By Richard Smart¹



I recently came across modified (2023) guidelines for alcohol consumption in Canada (see www.ccsa.ca). For moderate risk the recommended intake was three to six standard drinks per week, which I found surprisingly low. The guidelines further suggest a low risk for consumption of two drinks a week or less, and increasingly high for seven drinks a week or more. A standard drink is 340ml of beer or a glass of 12% wine, 140 ml. The guidelines were updated from 2011.

Australia has also recently reviewed guidelines in 2020. These are for adults to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease: *healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week*, and no more than four a day.

I wondered if what is considered as a safe consumption level is now decreasing because of better health statistics and analyses. I further pondered if this tendency may lead to alcohol receiving more government attention, as did tobacco use after health warnings in the 1950s?

Some reactions

Cancer is the leading cause of death in

Canada. However, the fact that *alcohol is a carcinogen* that can cause at least seven types of cancer is often unknown or overlooked. The most recent available data show that the use of alcohol causes nearly 7,000 cases of cancer deaths each year in Canada, with most cases being breast or colon cancer, followed by cancers of the rectum, mouth and throat, liver, esophagus and larynx. According to the Canadian Cancer Society, drinking less alcohol is among the top 10 behaviours to reduce cancer risk.

The Canadian press (CBC) responded to the recent guidelines announcement, including statements that 25% of drinkers do not know that alcohol can cause cancer. Specialists say that health benefits have been largely debunked but they continue to circulate causing confusion and misunderstanding. The Canadian discussion, as might be expected, involved warning labels on alcohol containers.

Interestingly, in January 2023 the Irish Government declared its intention of warning labels on alcohol containers (“Drinking alcohol causes Liver disease” and “There is a direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers”). Wine is the

second favourite beverage, with those of Chile, Spain and Australia preferred. There have been protests by Italy, Spain and six other EU member states.

In February 2021 the European Commission launched “Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan”, focusing on prevention including alcohol policy solutions. This plan contains a target of 10% reduction in per capita alcohol use by 2025. One measure of the plan involves health warning labelling. In the EU in 2016, cancer was the most common cause of alcohol-related deaths at 29%. Will label health warnings on alcohol become common in Europe? Some argue so.

Conclusion

I have no pretense as to expertise in this area of public health and alcohol. I was however concerned when reading the new Canadian guidelines, and wondering how such guidelines might affect the Australian grape and wine sector in the future. For those interested in the possible tobacco parallel, the history of tobacco use in Australia is interesting reading, see www.tobaccoinaustralia.org.au.

GW

¹Smart Viticulture, Glenroy, Vic. E: vinedoctor@smartvit.com.au