

Ingredient and nutrition information labelling of alcoholic beverages: do consumers want it?

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TO THE EDITOR: In Australia, the packaging of alcoholic beverages, unlike that of non-alcoholic beverages, is not required to display a list of ingredients or nutritional information, such as the amount of sugar, calories, and any preservatives contained in the drink.¹ It is possible that consumers, especially some population groups such as weight-conscious young women, might be less inclined to drink as much alcohol if they knew the calorie content of what they were consuming. There has been no published research on whether Australian consumers want this information.

In April 2007, we invited (by letter and email) a random sample of 13 000 students aged 17–25 years at an Australian university to complete a web survey on alcohol consumption, health effects, and attitudes toward nutrition/ingredient labelling. Of the students invited, 7237 responded (56% response rate), and 6497 of these (90%) had consumed alcohol in the preceding 12 months.

Results suggest that more than three-quarters of this population group want to see both ingredients and nutritional information displayed on alcoholic beverage packaging (Box). No more than 4% of respondents disagreed with each of these measures. Support for labelling of information among people who exceeded National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines for avoiding acute harm (no more than four drinks per occasion for women; no more than six for men)² was somewhat lower than in moderate or non-drinkers (ingredients: 75% v 86%, $P < 0.001$; nutritional information: 72% v 78%, $P < 0.001$). Support for the labelling of ingredients was somewhat greater among women than men (85% v 75%, $P < 0.001$), while support for the provision of nutritional information was considerably greater among women (83% v 65%, $P < 0.001$).

We have been unable to find any studies on the effect of ingredient or nutritional information labelling on drinking behaviour. There would be value in knowing whether such labelling might influence beverage choice or overall alcohol consumption. There has been considerable debate on the effectiveness of warning labels of the type introduced in the United States in 1989, that emphasise the dangers of alcohol impairment while driving.³ A recent review of scientific studies suggested that these warning labels have no measur-

able effects on drinking behaviour.⁴ One might therefore expect there to be little or no effect of ingredient or nutrition labels. However, it is possible that the current preoccupation with weight gain in many developed countries, including Australia, might be a more compelling motive for behaviour change than alcohol-related injury risk.

Regardless of whether such labels might affect drinking behaviour, it is hard to understand why alcoholic beverages are not subject to the same requirements for disclosing ingredients and nutritional information as non-alcoholic beverages. While the results of our survey cannot be extrapolated to the entire Australian population, the strength of support for (and lack of opposition to) these measures, even among heavy drinkers, suggests that bringing alcohol packaging into line with non-alcoholic beverage packaging would have public support.

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1 Food Standards Australia New Zealand. User guides to the new Food Standards Code. <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/the/code/assistance-for-industry/userguides> (accessed Jul 2007).

2 National Health and Medical Research Council. Australian alcohol guidelines: health risks and benefits. Canberra: NHMRC, 2001.

3 Kaskutas LA. Interpretations of risk: the use of scientific information in the development of the alcohol warning label policy. *Int J Addict* 1995; 30: 1519–1548.

4 Babor T, Caetano R, Casswell S, et al. Alcohol: no ordinary commodity. Research and public policy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. □

Responses to survey statements*

Statement and response	Women	Men	All
<i>It should be a requirement that the ingredients in alcoholic beverages are displayed on the bottle/can/cask</i>			
Strongly agree	1991 (48%)	1239 (40%)	3230 (45%)
Agree	1501 (36%)	1104 (36%)	2605 (36%)
Neither agree nor disagree	572 (14%)	651 (21%)	1223 (17%)
Disagree	49 (1%)	85 (3%)	134 (2%)
Strongly disagree	5 (< 1%)	30 (1%)	35 (< 1%)
Total	4118 (100%)	3109 (100%)	7227 (100%)
<i>It should be a requirement that nutritional information (eg, the amount of sugar and kilojoules) is displayed on bottles/cans/casks of alcohol</i>			
Strongly agree	1890 (46%)	1016 (33%)	2906 (40%)
Agree	1529 (37%)	1018 (33%)	2547 (35%)
Neither agree nor disagree	607 (15%)	864 (28%)	1471 (20%)
Disagree	79 (2%)	149 (5%)	228 (3%)
Strongly disagree	11 (< 1%)	61 (2%)	72 (1%)
Total	4116 (100%)	3108 (100%)	7224 (100%)

* Not all respondents answered these questions. ◆