

### ACTION ON ALCOHOL MISUSE

The antismoking campaign in Australia was recently reinvigorated with the announcement of mandatory plain packaging for cigarettes and an increase in the tax imposed on them. The federal government projects that the latter measure alone will reduce the number of smokers by around 2%–3%, or about 87 000 Australians. Hopefully, this reduction will include a sizeable proportion of young Australians.

Correspondingly, the increase in the excise on cigarettes is expected to raise an extra \$5 billion over 4 years, with the windfall to be injected directly into health. The public health fraternity applauded these measures, and one academic observed: “*The government's actions will over time prevent literally hundreds of thousands of premature deaths from cancer, heart disease and many other conditions ... Australia has become the world leader in tobacco control.*”\*

However, there is another elephant in the room — alcohol misuse and its impact. The scourge of alcohol misuse seems to be permanently caught in the moral blind spot of politicians and policymakers. Given the standing of alcohol as a social lubricant and the observed dichotomy of its good and bad effects on health, it all seems too hard. Many Australians may even see alcohol as an integral part of our heritage and culture. But at what cost?

In the United Kingdom, the cost to the National Health Service of treating alcohol-related disease has risen from around £1 billion in 2001 to £2.7 billion. The wider cost to the British community of alcohol misuse is estimated to be a staggering £55 billion. There is no reason why comparable figures should not apply in Australia.

The adverse social effects of alcohol, so poignantly depicted by English artist William Hogarth more than 250 years ago in *Gin Lane*, have tragically escalated in our times. It is now imperative that we replicate the modus operandi of the antismoking campaign in taking action on alcohol misuse.



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\* Public Health Association of Australia. Smoking to plummet — tax increase will bring massive health benefits [media release]. 29 Apr 2010.

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