

Lower-alcohol, lower-calorie wines: harm reduction or harm production?

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TO THE EDITOR: We have previously argued that the recent rapid increase in the popularity of low-carbohydrate (“low-carb”) beers, in Australia and other countries, is more a community health risk than a healthy alternative to traditional beers.¹ This contention has since been supported by a survey conducted by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), which found that “low carbohydrate beer drinkers mistakenly believe these beverages are a healthier choice than other varieties”.² Seventy-one per cent of respondents believed that low-carbohydrate beer is healthier than full-carbohydrate beer, despite having the same alcohol content. Alarming, 15% of respondents indicated that they consume more beer when drinking low-carbohydrate beer because they believe it is healthier than full-carbohydrate beer.

The potentially insidious marketing of health benefits for alcohol products has recently been followed by the release of lower-alcohol, lower-calorie wines such as the McWilliam’s Balance range, Cockatoo Ridge’s Low Calorie Brut Cuvée, Beringer Blass’s White Lie, and the JMB Beverages Brightlite range. These are represented as containing a “lower” rather than “low” alcohol content because, at between 6.5% and 9.5% alcohol by volume, these wines clearly contain a far higher alcohol content than the $\leq 1.15\%$ alcohol by volume that is required by Australian food standards to be represented as a low-alcohol product.³ The health-based marketing of these wines is similar to that of low-carb beer — it implies that consuming these products is healthier than consuming traditional versions. This implied health benefit message is reinforced by endorsement of McWilliam’s Balance wines by Weight Watchers and inclusion of these wines in the Weight Watchers diet program, which is followed by over 1.8 million Australians annually.⁴ According to its manufacturers, “McWil-

liam's Balance is destined for incredible consumer demand".⁴

McWilliam's Balance wines contain about one-third less alcohol and one-third fewer kilojoules than regular wines.⁴ If these wines are being consumed to replace regular wine consumption in the same quantity, they could offer a community health benefit. If they are consumed instead of soft drinks or water in the belief that they are healthier than regular wines, or consumed in larger quantities than regular wine in the belief that they are healthier, they could represent a community health threat.

Presently, the Australian Government is considering making alcohol companies display nutritional information and ingredients on all beer, wine and spirits labels as a result of a submission by the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia.⁵ Governments need to modify food regulations to help make the message more explicit: lower-alcohol, lower-calorie wines are not a licence to drink to your own health.

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1 Miller PG, McKenzie SP, de Groot FP, et al. The growing popularity of "low-carb" beers: good marketing or insidious community health risk [letter]? *Med J Aust* 2010; 192: 235.

2 VicHealth. Survey: low carb beer drinkers. <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Alcohol-Misuse/Low-carb-beer.aspx> (accessed May 2011).

3 Food Standards Australia New Zealand. Standard 2.7.1. Labelling of alcoholic beverages and food containing alcohol. http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/_srcfiles/Standard_2_7_1_Alc%20label_v64.pdf (accessed May 2011).

4 McWilliam's Wines Group. Australian first! <http://www.mcwilliams.com.au/australian-first> (accessed May 2011).

5 Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia. Submission to the Food Labelling Law and Policy Review. Canberra: ADCA, 2010. <http://www.adca.org.au/images/publications/adca%20submission%20to%20the%20food%20labelling%20law%20and%20policy%20review.pdf> (accessed May 2011). □