

EDITOR'S CORNER

The Arrogance of Power: Alcohol Industry Interference With Warning Label Research

IN THIS ISSUE, the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* publishes a set of interrelated articles that speak volumes about the potential role of alcohol warning labels in the prevention of alcohol-related morbidity and mortality. At a time when the alcohol industry and public health authorities are both moving toward the development of procedures that would advise consumers about the health hazards of alcohol consumption, alcohol scientists at Public Health Ontario and the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria have been conducting groundbreaking studies that are sure to advance alcohol labeling policy, labeling research, and prevention theory.

Groundbreaking research

In the first article, Zhao et al. (2020) describe an innovative analysis of the population-level impact of introducing evidence-informed alcohol warning labels in Whitehorse, Yukon, that included (a) a cancer warning, (b) low-risk drinking guidelines, and (c) standard drink messages. An interrupted time series analysis evaluated the effects of these labels for 28 months before and 14 months after starting the intervention. Compared with neighboring regions of Yukon and the Northwest Territories (which served as control sites), per capita sales of labeled products (the great majority of sales) declined in the intervention community by 6.6%, whereas sales of the many fewer unlabeled products increased by 6.9%. The results suggest an accumulating effect over time when highly visible labels with impactful messages are introduced in rotation.

In addition to the warning labels' influence on population alcohol sales, a set of related studies was conducted to evaluate consumer awareness of alcohol-related health information and how this is affected by the introduction of various warning labels. Vallance et al. (2020a) assessed consumers' baseline knowledge of alcohol-related health information by conducting surveys with 836 liquor store patrons. They found a low level of knowledge of alcohol–breast cancer risk (24.4%), limited ability to calculate a standard drink (28.9%), and low knowledge of daily (48.9%) and weekly (47.6%) low-risk drinking limits. Support for health warn-

ings (55.4%) and standard drink information (51.0%) was moderate. The authors conclude that despite the rather low level of alcohol-related health knowledge, there was moderate support for alcohol warning labels as a tool to raise awareness. As might be expected, support was lower among heavy drinkers than other groups.

Hobin et al. (2020) tested the effects of the cancer warning labels on drinkers' recall and knowledge. Two to 4 months after application of the cancer labels, unprompted and prompted recall increased to a greater extent in the intervention versus comparison sites. Similar results were found 6 months after the intervention for all three outcomes.

Using a creative two-group pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design, Schoueri-Mychasiw et al. (2020) examined the impact of national low-risk drinking guideline labels. Awareness of the drinking guidelines increased from 30.7% pre- to 67.0% post-intervention and was 2.89 times greater in the intervention versus comparison site. This study showed that enhanced alcohol labels are noticed and may be an effective strategy for increasing awareness and knowledge of national drinking guidelines.

Another direction taken in this research program was precipitated quite unexpectedly when alcohol industry lobbyists pressured the Yukon government to temporarily shut down the research. Two articles address the influence of the alcohol industry itself.

In the first article, Vallance et al. (2020b) analyzed media coverage of alcohol warning labels with a cancer message in Canada, and compared the Yukon coverage with a related initiative in Ireland. This kind of research is particularly important because media coverage can influence public debate and policy outcomes, especially if it is more aligned with the interests of the alcohol industry than with those of public health authorities. The investigators found that 68.4% of media articles covering the Yukon study ($n = 38$) and 18.9% covering the Ireland Bill ($n = 37$) were supportive of alcohol warning labels with a cancer message. Industry arguments opposing the warning labels were similar across both contexts, often containing statements from industry representatives distorting or denying the evidence that alcohol causes cancer. The finding that news coverage of alcohol warning

labels with a cancer message was more supportive in Canada than in Ireland may have been due to media coverage of the industry's opposition to the warning label study itself. By drawing attention to its own lobbying activities, the industry may have inadvertently increased public support for alcohol policies and helped to further broadcast the message that alcohol is a cause of cancer.

In their concluding article, Stockwell et al. (2020) explore three issues in the ongoing debate over alcohol warning labels: (a) a consumer's right to know, (b) a government's responsibility to inform, and (c) an industry's power to thwart both consumer rights and government responsibility. These issues are discussed not only in the context of the Yukon labeling study but also in relation to recent industry interference in alcohol labeling policy in South Korea and Ireland. The authors describe how their federally funded scientific study in Canada was affected by industry interference. Despite a temporary pause in the labeling program, enough data were collected to make these reports possible. In similar fashion, industry complaints in South Korea helped to weaken that country's implementation of cancer warning labels. And in Ireland, cancer warnings faced continuing legal opposition from industry groups.

The arrogance of power

In addition to the interference observed in Canada, South Korea, and Ireland, alcohol industry tactics are raising eyebrows in other parts of the world as well. These tactics are notable because of their inconsistency with the industry's public pronouncements that they are committed to encourage "responsible drinking" through guidance labels and other measures to prevent alcohol-impaired driving and youth drinking.

In Africa, one transnational beer producer has been described in a recent book by Van Beemen (2019) as a company engaged in tax avoidance, high-level corruption, unfair competition, collaboration with dictators, and human rights violations. In Vietnam, the alcohol industry, especially the large transnationals, successfully lobbied against a recent draft alcohol law that contained many of the World Health Organization-recommended alcohol policy best buys (Movendi International, 2019a, 2019b).

The arrogance of the industry's economic and political power would be extremely discouraging to the public health community were it not for the opportunities it provides for what can be described as pseudo-stakeholder counter-marketing. This term represents the synthesis of concepts that have emerged from recent studies of the alcohol industry. Stakeholder marketing refers to the design and implementation of marketing activities to maximally benefit all stakeholders, including consumers, shareholders, employees, nonprofit organizations and society at large (Smith et al., 2010). Often this takes the form of corporate social responsi-

bility (CSR) initiatives under the assumption that companies can "do well" by "doing good." The problem with the alcohol industry's CSR activities from a public health perspective is that they tend to be more effective at promoting brand awareness than they are at doing any good for the health of their consumers (Babor et al., 2019). Thus, much of the industry's CSR can be seen as a form of pseudo-stakeholder marketing. And when the industry lobbies government officials to oppose cancer warning labels by claiming that they have already developed untested "guidance labels," or when they threaten legal action to shut down a research project to test the impact of labels developed by independent experts, they are using their political power to make a statement that is not very conducive to real stakeholder marketing. Public health authorities have been attentive to the lessons learned from the tobacco industry, whose anti-scientific tactics eventually became a self-inflicted counter-marketing campaign when their bad behavior was exposed by investigative journalists and social scientists examining documents obtained through court litigation. The Yukon studies reported here are a good example of how the alcohol industry is capable of creating the same kind of pseudo-stakeholder counter-marketing that broadcasts the very messages they want to suppress.

Three conclusions that cannot be ignored

No single study or program of research conducted in one country is likely to provide definitive answers to critical policy questions about alcohol warning labels. But the articles in this thematic section of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* offer a clear set of conclusions that cannot be ignored.

- Alcohol warning labels, when implemented in a clear and visible way, can not only communicate important health information to consumers but also discourage them from purchasing alcohol.
- Enhanced alcohol labels are noticed and may be an effective population-level strategy for increasing awareness and knowledge of cancer risks and national drinking guidelines, including the kinds of brief intervention messages that health professionals are now expected to communicate to their hazardous drinking patients.
- Additional cancer label intervention studies are needed to refine the messages and study their impact in research programs that are not compromised by industry interference.

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THOMAS F. BABOR, PH.D., M.P.H.^{a,b,*}

^a*Editor, Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*

^b*Professor, Department of Public Health Sciences
UConn Health,
Farmington, Connecticut*

**babor@uchc.edu*

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