

Alcohol Action NZ

C/- The John Dobson Memorial Foundation
PO Box 443, Christchurch 8140
www.alcoholaction.co.nz

22 June 2011

Rt Hon John Key
Prime Minister
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

Dear Prime Minister

Re: National alcohol crisis exemplified by recent events at King's College

In the wake of recent events at King's College we are writing to encourage you to take a fresh look at alcohol and lead a change in the heavy drinking culture by strengthening the Alcohol Reform Bill.

There are currently 20 ongoing alcohol-related deaths every week and 200 alcohol-related physical and sexual assaults every day in New Zealand, but because this situation has existed a long time, the damage is largely accepted as part of the Kiwi way of life, rather than seen for what it actually is, a national crisis. It is only when there are high profile alcohol and other drug-related deaths that a glimmer of recognition of a crisis is acknowledged. We are aware that alcohol-related deaths often involve a number of interacting factors but if heavy drinking was removed, death would usually have been significantly less likely.

The once-in-a-generation review of the liquor laws by the Law Commission group sparked hope that things might really begin to change. This hope is turning to despair when faced with the Government's response to the Law Commission's 153 recommendations. Virtually all of the major recommendations that could make a significant difference to changing the high levels of harmful drinking have been ignored. Further, it has been noticed that the Government is now using PR rhetoric such as "hard hitting Bill", "getting tough on alcohol" "enacting over 100 of the recommendations" etc to sell the Bill, when the reality is the Alcohol Reform Bill amounts to little more than tinkering with the problem. The worthwhile initiatives that are included will only go a very small way towards doing something about New Zealand's heavy drinking culture, without the support of serious environmental changes.

The primary driver of the heavy drinking culture is the excessive commercialisation of alcohol. Two hundred thousand dollars a day is spent by the alcohol industry promoting alcohol to the population, especially young people, as the vehicle to a successful happy life, being part of the popular in-group and being sexually attractive. This unrelenting marketing brainwash outside the gates of King's College and everywhere else in New Zealand is also inadvertently driving home the message that using drugs (primarily drinking alcohol but other drugs by implication) is the accepted healthy way of celebrating anything in New Zealand, to the extent of it being an everyday habit. This pervasive promotion of alcohol along with very low alcohol prices, high availability to young people, 24/7 accessibility to everyone, legal adult drunk driving and relatively impoverished treatment services for heavy drinkers is a perfect recipe for establishing and maintaining a heavy drinking culture – the opposite of Alcohol Action's 5+ Solution for changing the heavy drinking culture based on the best international World Health Organisation evidence available.

The fact that the Alcohol Reform Bill doesn't contain even one big ticket item suggests the Government is just not serious about leading a change in the heavy drinking culture.

The Chief Science Advisor, Sir Peter Gluckman, has recently advised your office that increasing the purchase price of alcohol, more tightly regulating drink-driving and restricting the marketing and availability of alcohol would “reduce the considerable harm that excessive alcohol consumption does to New Zealand’s young people” in a highly prestigious, peer-reviewed report on the state of health of New Zealand’s youth. In fact, these are the same measures required to reduce the considerable harm that excessive alcohol consumption does to New Zealanders as a whole. While there is a disproportionate amount of alcohol harm from young people, less than 10% of the heavy drinkers in New Zealand are under the age of 20 years, which is why focusing on youth won’t work.

We note that two of these measures – establishing a minimum price for a standard drink, and reducing the adult drink driving limit – remain on the Government agenda albeit currently on hold pending “more research”. However, neither of these two measures needs more research to safely act on from a scientific point of view.

Two requests

(i) We respectfully urge you to reconsider the state of the Alcohol Reform Bill, in the light of both Sir Peter Gluckman’s report and the Law Commission’s final recommendations, and incorporate the following measures into a strengthened Alcohol Reform Bill, in order of priority:

- 1. Introduce a minimum price per standard drink to end ultra-cheap alcohol sales**
- 2. Reduce the adult drink-driving limit from 0.08 to 0.05**
- 3. Begin the dismantling of alcohol advertising and sponsorship over a five year period**
- 4. Restore supermarkets to be alcohol-free**
- 5. Return the purchase age for both on- and off-license to 20 years**

(ii) We would be most grateful for the opportunity to discuss these issues further with you in a face-to-face meeting.

We are taking the liberty of copying this letter to a number of key people who are active in the alcohol reform process, including the group of 450 leading Doctors and Nurses in New Zealand who previously endorsed the 5+ Solution as the evidence-based guide to alcohol law reform.

Yours faithfully



Professor Doug Sellman
Director, National Addiction Centre
University of Otago, Christchurch
Mobile: 0274-344456

Professor Jennie Connor
Head, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine
University of Otago, Dunedin
021-2797745

Dr Geoffrey Robinson
Chief Medical Officer
Capital & Coast District Health Board
Mobile: 0274-940559

Medical Spokespeople
Alcohol Action NZ
www.alcoholaction.co.nz