1 October 2018

Hon Aaron Stonehouse MLC
Chair
Select Committee on Personal Choice and Community Safety
Legislative Council
By email: pccs@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Hon Stonehouse MLC,

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry regarding the impacts of alcohol on the Western Australian community.

Alcohol is often referred to as ‘no ordinary commodity’, and for good reason. While many people enjoy a drink, alcohol is associated with significant risk of harms to the drinker and harms to others. The human, social, and financial costs of failing to effectively regulate alcohol are too great to leave to individual responsibility. For example:

- Alcohol use costs the WA community $3.1 billion each year in policing costs, hospitalisations, road crashes, and ambulances.²
- In WA last year, an average of 15 ambulances per day were called out for the primary reason of alcohol intoxication (5,324 in total).³ Many were taken to hospital, contributing to the burden of alcohol on our emergency departments and health services.
- Alcohol is a cause of cancer and is classified as a group 1 carcinogen, the same classification as tobacco smoke and asbestos.⁴ Yet public awareness of the link between alcohol and cancer remains low.⁵ If drinkers are not fully informed of the risks of alcohol, it is not possible for them to make informed decisions about their own drinking behaviours.
- The brain continues to develop into the early 20s. Risky drinking can irreparably damage the developing brain leading to problems with memory, planning and organisation, impulse control, and mood regulation.⁶

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The extent of harms to those around the drinker provide an urgent and compelling case for action by governments to regulate how alcohol is made available, taxed, and promoted. Alcohol’s harms to others include:

- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, an entirely preventable but incurable condition caused by the baby’s exposure to alcohol in the womb;
- Family violence;
- Violence on the streets; and
- Road crashes from drink-driving.

Governments have important roles and duty of care in preventing these harms. The environment in which individuals operate, the prevailing drinking culture, and the way alcohol is made available need to support low risk alcohol use. A substantial evidence base is available to guide governments in regard to effective approaches to preventing and reducing harm from alcohol. Based on evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, the World Health Organization has identified the top three ‘Best buys’ for reducing the harmful use of alcohol:

- Increase excise taxes on alcoholic beverages;
- Enact and enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising; and
- Enact and enforce restrictions on the physical availability of retailed alcohol.

Action by governments and other key stakeholders to reduce harm from alcohol should be guided by the ‘Best buys’ and other evidence-based frameworks developed by health authorities.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Julia Stafford
Executive Officer, McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth

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