

Binge Advertising

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All over the world, governments struggle to find ways of balancing individual freedom with social responsibility. With restrictions on smoking a battleground over recent years, attention has now shifted to excessive alcohol consumption, an area where preventive action is likely to have a considerable effect.

In the UK, the issue has been highlighted by the recent introduction of a private members' bill in parliament by Conservative MP and former general medical practitioner Sarah Wollaston which aims to further regulate alcohol marketing.

It hardly needs to be said that excessive alcohol consumption has many short- and long-term effects. Some of these are clearly a direct cause, such as liver disease, while others, like poor judgement, slow responses and diminished risk awareness, operate more indirectly but can be said to increase greatly the chances of potentially life-threatening events, such as a road accident or drowning. And in addition to all of these, excessive alcohol consumption can combine with other factors to produce a plethora of serious problems. These include violence, child neglect, anti-social behaviour, chronic poverty, job dismissal, sexual exploitation and unwanted pregnancy. All of these, of course, also affect the families and friends of both victims and perpetrators.

The situation of young people is especially worrying. While concern about the antics of the young is nothing new – Shakespeare's shepherd in *The Winter's Tale* opined that young men did little else except 'getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing and fighting' – in Western societies there appears to have been an increase in excessive drinking by young people and exposure to advertising that expounds its joys.

The effects of these are considerable. For example, in 2008 in England, a quarter of the 2,843 deaths of people aged between 15 and 24 were attributable to alcohol, more than the figures for cancer, heart and respiratory disease combined. In addition, a study of English schoolchildren's attitudes to alcohol found that the alleged benefits, such as happiness and helping to blot out problems, far outweighed the harmful effects; more so than anywhere else in Europe.

Wollaston's concern is that alcohol manufacturers spend huge amounts of money – some £800 million annually – advertising their products and creating a "cool" image to attract young customers. By contrast, only £2.6 million is spent on alcohol education. Worry about this imbalance is well justified; only Denmark and the Isle of Man have higher levels of binge drinking and drunkenness among young people. Unsurprisingly, the World Health Organisation has admitted that effective health education presents something of a challenge in such a drink obsessed culture.

While evidence suggesting that the amount spent on advertising affects the behaviour of teenagers in terms of the age at which they start to drink and the amount they consume,

legislation that removes such an unhealthy influence should have some effect. Moreover, it will bring further benefits with regard to the social problems described earlier.

But here we hit the need to balance social responsibility and individual freedom: an outright ban on alcohol advertising would no doubt be highly controversial given the desire of adults in Western societies to feel that they can determine their own life styles. Separating the issue of advertising alcohol to the young is thus key. Twenty years ago, France's Loi Evin policy restricted alcohol advertising to sections of the media largely focused on adults. This has had an observable effect in reducing consumption. In Britain, however, the situation remains muddled. There are self-regulatory codes listing wording that cannot be used in advertising, but there are also glaring contradictions: for instance, advertisers have pledged to avoid associating alcohol consumption with athletic prowess, while at the same time manufacturers are allowed to sponsor sporting events and music festivals.

Wollaston's bill seeks to introduce France's Loi Evin policy to Britain. It would allow alcohol manufacturers to advertise their products and make claims for them in the adult media, provided a health warning is attached, but they would not be allowed to do this in advertising on television, films, social media and at cultural events aimed at young people. The bill faces no issue in terms of its compatibility with EU law as this has already been tested by the French.

No doubt the alcohol manufacturers will protest at such restrictions, as the tobacco companies did when their ability to advertise their products to young people was curtailed a generation ago. One claim certain to be heard is that banning alcohol sponsorship of sporting events will hamper the success of sporting stars, a group greatly admired by young people. Given that the French national football team has had rather more World Cup success in recent years than either of the UK's four home sides, that particular claim should not be hard to refute.

Reference

Gerard Hastings and Nick Sheron, Alcohol marketing to children
Editorial, *British Medical Journal*, 342, p.1767, 24th March 2011