

Alcohol Labelling: Could good intentions lead to unintended consequences?

Written by Christopher Snowdon on 3 May 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

We must ask ourselves what we want to achieve through labelling, says Christopher Snowdon | *Photo credit: Press Association*

Ahead of our upcoming feature on Alcohol Labelling, here's an exclusive excerpt from Christopher Snowdon's *Parliament Magazine* article



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... "We must ask ourselves what we want to achieve through labelling. The goal is - or should be - to provide consumers with enough information to make a rational choice according to their preferences.

It is possible that more information could lead to greater consumption of a product, although this is not the intention of the 'public health' groups that are currently lobbying for alcohol labelling. They would like to go much further and place cigarette-style health warnings on alcohol, such as 'Alcohol Causes Cancer', with the express purpose of deterring people from drinking.

An argument could be made for some form of health warning if there was good evidence that (a) many people are misinformed about certain risks, (b) those risks are meaningful and well-proven, (c) the warnings would make a difference to patterns of behaviour, and (d) it is not possible to effectively transmit the information by other means. In most cases, however, the case for warning labels fails to meet at least one of these criteria.

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On a practical level, consumers who are given too many warnings might get 'warning blindness' and decide to ignore them all. This seems to be happening in California where a vast number of products are labelled with the warning that they 'contain chemicals known to cause cancer and birth defects'.

When health warnings are ubiquitous, consumers find it difficult to distinguish between serious risks and minor hazards. 'Smoking causes lung cancer' and 'Alcohol causes breast cancer' are both evidence-based claims insofar as they reflect an increased risk of contracting the diseases according to epidemiological research, but the risk from drinking is very small compared to the risk from smoking.

Smoking causes around 70 per cent of lung cancer cases whereas drinking causes only around six per cent of breast cancer cases, and the evidence for the former is more robust than for the latter. Unless risks are put into context, there is a likelihood that consumers will make personal trade-offs based on an exaggerated perception of the hazards, which is to say they will consume less than would be optimal for them..."

To read the full article, don't miss the next issue of the Parliament Magazine, out 15 May.

About the author

Christopher Snowdon is head of lifestyle economics at the Institute of Economic Affairs

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