

Alcohol Healthwatch – Media Release 30 June 2014

Alcohol labelling decision a travesty of justice for unborn babies

At a meeting in Australia last week, trans-Tasman ministers responsible for food safety voted to allow the alcohol industry yet another two years to ‘voluntarily’ warn consumers of the risks of consuming alcohol during pregnancy.

Alcohol Healthwatch Director Rebecca Williams says the industry’s voluntary efforts over the past two years have been pathetic and typical of their delaying tactics to avoid regulatory intervention.

Ms Williams says effective labelling is proven to raise awareness of the risks of consuming alcohol during pregnancy. Children exposed to alcohol in the womb are at risk of serious and permanent brain damage and other life-long disabilities, known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. She says, the rights of these children are being overlooked to protect the profits of the alcohol industry.

A New Zealand-led application for warning labels was submitted to Food Standards Australia New Zealand in 2006. In response and after years of delay the alcohol industry was given two years to include warning messages on products voluntarily. Those two years were up in December 2013.

An independent audit undertaken in Australia showed that alcohol industry efforts were totally inadequate. The audit* of 250 products in Australia found that while there had been some improvements since 2012:

- only 37 percent carried any version of the Drinkwise consumer information messages
- only 26 percent carried a pregnancy-related message
- the majority of warning messages (86 percent) took up less than 5 percent of the label
- of products carrying the industry label most (59 percent) were at the back of the product.

Williams says both the Australia and New Zealand Governments are well aware of the risks associated with drinking alcohol, and they are aware of what is required to address these risks.

“Self-regulation and voluntary codes of practice by the alcohol industry are shown to be ineffective and do nothing but delay more effective measures being adopted.”

In a speech about vulnerable children in August 2013 the Prime Minister John Key said, *“As Prime Minister, I want to see every one of our children getting the very best start to life. They deserve nothing less.”* ** Ms Williams says better warnings on alcohol products would help many children get a better start.

“This latest alcohol labelling decision clearly demonstrates the power the alcohol industry wields. It is time for Governments on both sides of the Tasman to push back and make decisions based on the evidence and what is in the best interests of the wider community, especially those without a voice.”

For further comment contact Rebecca Williams Director Alcohol Healthwatch (09) 520 7035 or 021 862 250

*<http://www.fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Alcohol-Label-Audit-September-2013.pdf>

** <http://johnkey.co.nz/archives/1710-Key-Notes-Protecting-vulnerable-children.html>