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Response to Cancer Council Australia's alcohol research and advertising campaign

The Winemakers' Federation of Australia supports Cancer Council Australia's suggestions that people who drink alcohol "should follow the guidelines for alcohol consumption as recommended by the NHMRC". It has always been the wine industry's view that alcohol should be drunk only by adults in moderation and WFA has been involved with numerous campaigns and activities to promote this message.

However, we have a concern with CCA's new advertising campaign and its media announcement on 1 May 2011, which imply that the link between alcohol and cancer risk is new. It is not. It has been known for at least 20 years, as has the link between cancer risk and sunlight, coal fires in the home and coffee, to name but three. In each case, individuals need to assess the costs and benefits.

Data suggests that in 2003 alcoholic beverages accounted for approximately 3.1% of the total cancer burden in Australia (that is, 3.1% of the years of life lost due to premature death from cancer and years of healthy life lost due to disability from cancer). This figure was increased to 3.5% in 2005 and the CCA suggests that this figure is now 5%, when cancers of the colon and rectum are included in calculations.

It is known that the cumulative effect of other lifestyle choices such as tobacco smoking with alcohol contributes to this figure. Tobacco alone accounts for 20.3% of the cancer burden, and physical inactivity 5.6% (Begg et al. 2003, 2007).

The relationship between alcohol consumption and cancer is also linear, where the risk increases as the consumption of an alcoholic beverage increases (Toriola et al. 2010). Low consumption suggests relatively low risk. In addition, alcohol consumption is associated with certain cancers but not necessarily all cancers.

While, as CAA notes, there is currently no research to show a positive relationship between moderate alcohol consumption and cancer risk, there is a proven positive relationship with cardiovascular disease, which is acknowledged by the World Health Organisation (Mukamal et al. 2010, WHO 2010).

Moderate alcohol consumption reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease by approximately 25% (Brien et al. 2011, Ronskley et al. 2011) such that alcohol accounts for – 4.7% of the total cardiovascular disease burden in Australia. Thus, in relation to this health risk, moderate alcohol consumption is a positive.

References

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