

Australia failing to stop alcohol ads reaching children, experts say

Calls for tougher regulation of industry and closure of loophole that allows alcohol advertising during televised sport



Police during an operation targeting underage drinking in Sydney. Policy expert Dr David Jernigan says alcohol is the No 1 cause of death and disability for 15 to 49-year-olds. Photograph: AAP

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A leading US expert on alcohol policy, Dr David Jernigan, says the Australian government is failing to use the significant power it has to regulate the alcohol industry to stop its advertisements reaching children.

Delivering the keynote address at the Global Alcohol Policy Conference in Melbourne on Wednesday, Jernigan said that in the US it is much harder to prevent underage youths from being exposed to alcohol advertising, because advertising is protected by the first amendment

of the US constitution.

Jernigan said this was concerning given the findings from a study he published in September that found alcohol brands popular among underage drinkers were more likely than other brands to advertise in magazines with a high underage readership.

His findings suggest the deliberate targeting of youths by the alcohol industry and expose the weakness of the US voluntary advertising industry guidelines.

But Jernigan, who is director of the US Centre on Alcohol Marketing and Youth and an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said there was significant potential for the Australian government to learn from the research and address the issue.

“In the US we have very strict constitutional protections for commercial speech but in Australia that is not the case, and there is more room for the government to take a more active regulatory role,” he said.

“Given the government’s larger responsibility to protect children, one would think governments like Australia would be more active in trying to restrict and reduce young people’s exposure to this kind of marketing, given alcohol is the No 1 cause of death and disability for 15 to 49-year-olds all over the world.”

Jernigan used to the conference to present a growing body of research that documents the association between exposure to alcohol marketing and the impact on youth drinking and related harms. In the US, the alcohol industry has more than one lobbyist for every two members of Congress, he said.

“We are talking about a situation not dissimilar to where we were with tobacco,” he told Guardian Australia. “What is it going to take to build the consensus among politicians about the harms of alcohol advertising that has been built around tobacco marketing? Yes, alcohol is a different product and there are more mixed messages around it but alcohol is more similar to tobacco than it is to something like laundry powder. And governments have decided that children being exposed to tobacco products is not a good thing.”

The executive officer of the McCusker Centre for Action on Alcohol and Youth in Australia, Julia Stafford, said health professionals and experts had long been calling on the government to impose tougher regulations on the alcohol industry, including closing a regulatory loophole that allows alcohol advertising to be shown during televised sport.

Alcohol sponsorship of sport, music and cultural events should also be phased out, according to Stafford and other peak bodies including the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education and the National Alliance for Action on Alcohol. They also say political donations from the alcohol industry are a conflict of interest.

The federal assistant health minister, Dr David Gillespie, spoke at the Global Alcohol Policy Conference and told attendees about new alcohol advertising placement rules being

introduced through the voluntary Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code [Abac] scheme. Abac comprises alcohol industry, advertising and government representatives.

“But there is no evidence what is being introduced will be at all effective to stop children being exposed to alcohol advertising,” Stafford said.

“For example, one of the rules says alcohol ads should only be placed where more than 75% of an audience is expected to be over 18 and that’s not the way to go because the proportion of the population who are under 18 is 22%, and if you take out babies and kids it’s 10%. So that’s a low bar.

“And when you think about major sporting events like grand finals or a very popular television show, kids may only comprise a small proportion of the audience yet we’re still talking hundreds of thousands of kids.”

The measure that would make the greatest difference would be introducing independent and legislated controls on alcohol marketing, Stafford said.

“The health department and the government more broadly must remove themselves from Abac and legislate to curb advertising as a first step towards proper regulation,” she said.

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