Should the Government Restrict Advertising of Alcoholic Beverages?

By ACSH Staff — July 1, 1997

Yes
by Laurie Leiber

For nearly two decades, two U.S. Surgeon Generals C. Everett Koop and Antonia Novello and numerous public health organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Parent Teachers Association, the American Medical Association, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving have called upon manufacturers of alcoholic beverages to advertise more responsibly. National polls show that Americans increasingly favor either restricting or banning broadcast alcohol advertising.

But despite this widespread support for advertising reform, the alcohol industry using its considerable political clout and such preemptive PR strategies as public-service campaigns and voluntary advertising codes has averted government limits. During the same 20 years, public health advocates working at local, state, and national levels began implementing a new approach to preventing alcohol-related problems. This new public health response is based on a substantial and growing body of evidence that limiting both alcohol advertising and alcohol availability and raising alcohol taxes decreases alcohol-related problems.

Alcohol-industry representatives often cite the incompleteness of the research record on alcohol advertising as proof that alcohol promotion has no impact on consumption. However, to clarify the impact of promotional efforts efforts on which the industry spends $2 billion annually independent researchers have begun to frame questions and pursue studies on the relationship between alcohol advertising and behavior and health.

Although more research is needed, there is strong scientific evidence that the effects of alcohol advertising, like the effects of tobacco advertising, are not limited to brand selection by adults. Research conducted by Joel W. Grube and Lawrence Wallack suggests that awareness of TV beer commercials leads to favorable beliefs about drinking in children 10 to 12 years old and increases their intention to drink as adults. Henry Saffer compared motor-vehicle deaths with quarterly measures for broadcast advertising in 75 media markets over a three-year period. He concluded that a ban on broadcast alcohol advertising would save 2,000 to 3,000 people annually from death due to alcohol-related motor-vehicle crashes.

In the past, alcoholic-beverage producers have argued that their voluntary public-service campaigns are more effective at decreasing alcohol-related problems than are government-imposed limits on alcohol advertising. But while public-service messages may engender goodwill for the companies sponsoring them, researchers DeJong, Atkin, and Wallack have described
these "responsible drinking" spots as thinly disguised drinking promotions. The longest-running campaign, Anheuser-Busch's "Know When to Say When," omits that sometimes it is not safe to imbibe at all. The campaign also leaves "when" undefined. At a recent Anheuser-Busch board meeting, officers opposed a shareholder request to add the U.S. Dietary Guidelines definition of moderation to the company's alcohol awareness materials.

Manufacturers of alcoholic beverages also assert that, because responsible advertising is advantageous to the industry, government-imposed restrictions are unnecessary. Trade groups representing the three branches of the alcohol industry (wine, beer, and distilled spirits) have adopted voluntary advertising codes. But these voluntary standards have not prevented the brewers from turning Halloween into a beer festival, marketing malt liquor on MTV, or using cute cartoon animals in commercials aired on TV during peak viewing times for young people.

Neither did the industry's standards prevent liquor producers from ending their decades-long voluntary ban on broadcast liquor commercials. After Seagram broke the ban in June 1996, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS) simply rewrote its Code of Good Practice.

Since then, commercials for Seagram's Crown Royale whiskey that feature dogs, ducks, and peacocks have appeared during weekend telecasts of college and professional sports events, broadcasts of ABC's Monday Night Football, and a 7:00 P.M. Cosby Show rerun. Print ads for liquor a magazine mainstay appear in periodicals such as Spin, nearly half of whose readers are under 21, and Allure, 44 percent of whose readers are underage. Billboard and print ads for Gordon's gin feature a cartoon boar. Quirky cutout characters populate Tanqueray vodka ads.

In terms of both content and placement, manufacturers of alcoholic beverages find few real limitations in the industry's voluntary advertising guidelines. Research conducted in spring 1996 by the Center on Alcohol Advertising showed that children aged 9 to 11 are more familiar with the Budweiser frogs than they are with Smokey Bear or Tony the Tiger.

Anheuser-Busch, the maker of Budweiser, responded to widespread criticism of the frog commercials by citing the adult appeal of the croaking amphibians. According to the Beer Institute ad code, if a symbol or character appeals to persons over 21, beer makers are free to use that image in their promotions no matter how much the image appeals to children.

The industry's voluntary standards also address settings in which alcohol ads should not appear. According to the Beer Institute's code, beer advertising is inappropriate for TV programs most of whose audience is "reasonably expected to be below the legal purchase age." However, both Advertising Age and The Wall Street Journal have reported that beer ads on MTV reached viewers 69 percent of whom were below the legal drinking age of 21.

The pertinent section of the Beer Institute's Advertising and Marketing Code reads: "Beer advertising and marketing materials should not be placed in magazines, newspapers, television programs, radio programs, or other media where most of the audience is reasonably expected to be below the legal purchase age." This means that the Institute does not consider an ad placement questionable unless at least half the audience is underage. In December 1996, possibly because it foresaw the AdAge and WSJ reports, Anheuser-Busch moved its ads from MTV to VH-1, a cable station whose proportion of adult viewers is higher. Five months later, Miller, the number-
two brewing company, announced that it would follow suit.

While broadcasters and advertisers routinely use detailed reports of audience demographics to develop marketing strategies, this information is not generally available to people concerned about the impact of broadcast advertising on the welfare of children or of the public. The "sentinel effect" of the AdAge and WSJ reports is temporary and narrow, affecting only a handful of cable stations.

Our government should mandate monitoring the reach of alcohol commercials and should hold broadcasters responsible for limiting young people's exposure to such advertising. By law, television and radio stations licensed to broadcast on the public airwaves must do so in the public interest. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) does not collect information on the frequency of alcohol commercials; nor does it gather age information on the viewers of such ads. The FCC could use such information to set goals for decreasing youth exposure. The agency could also require broadcasters to provide equal time for health-and-safety messages when alcohol commercials air during primetime or sports programs that reach large numbers of underage viewers.

While broadcast ads probably constitute their most powerful marketing tool, producers of alcoholic beverages use various other media to reach young consumers. Control of unethical alcohol advertising in these other media will require different strategies: An ordinance in Baltimore restricts billboard ads for alcoholic beverages to certain areas of the city. Citizens of Marin County, California, petitioned to eliminate prizes "decorated" with beer logos from the midway at their county fair. In 1996 groups in several states asked their alcoholic-beverage control agencies to ban Halloween-theme displays for beer in convenience stores and groceries. And the Federal Trade Commission's vote to restrict the use of R. J. Reynolds' Joe Camel character may open the door to similar action against "unfair" alcohol ads.

Advocates of public health and safety should press for mandatory limits on alcohol promotions that reach underage consumers, as manufacturers of alcoholic beverages have demonstrated that they cannot be trusted to market their products responsibly. The manufacturers are well aware that maintaining industry profits depends on "recruiting" young drinkers. Most Americans "mature out" of heavy drinking by their mid to late 20s, but an analysis of American alcohol consumption shows that heavy drinkers dominate the market: A mere 5 percent of the population drinks 53 percent of all the alcohol consumed in this country. Because nearly half of all young people in the U.S. begin drinking before they have graduated from junior high school, competition for market share among the next group of heavy drinkers means attracting people well below the legal drinking age. And people who begin drinking when they are very young are the likeliest lifelong heavy drinkers.
No one should expect alcoholic-beverage manufacturers to end their aggressive targeting of young people voluntarily. The industry is fiercely competitive and thus far has not placed children's welfare above profits. The costs to the United States of alcohol consumption are tremendous, with recent estimates approaching $100 billion per year. Our government has a legitimate interest in reducing both these costs and the human costs of alcohol-related illness, injury, and death. Restricting the promotion of alcoholic beverages, and particularly their promotion to children, should be part of a comprehensive strategy to abate alcohol-related problems through policy reform.

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As a psychiatrist, scientist, and former architect of the national effort to prevent alcohol problems, it was my job to seek out the best science, both biomedical and behavioral. Today, a heated debate swirls around the issue of restricting alcohol advertising on TV. Assorted opponents who argue that advertising contributes to alcohol-related problems especially among young people are way off base.

When I consider the pros and cons of alcohol advertising and its alleged effect on problem drinking, I find myself asking the crucial question: Where in the name of science is there proof that alcohol advertising is bad for society? Shouldn't there be some science to say it's so?

Last year I was asked to write a review for the New England Journal of Medicine on how advertising affects alcohol use. I did not find any studies that credibly connect advertising to increases in alcohol use (or abuse) or to young persons taking up drinking. The prevalence of reckless misinterpretation and misapplication of science allows advocacy groups and the media to stretch research findings to suit their preconceived positions.

For example, one study showed that adolescents who drank alcohol could remember alcohol ads better than adolescents who did not drink. But what does that prove? If researchers found that green-colored automobiles had more accidents than cars of other colors, would that prove the color green causes accidents?

Another study, supported by the Center on Alcohol Advertising, purportedly showed that people who knew about the federal guidelines on moderate drinking drank less than people who didn't know. Poppycock! The many variables that affect behavior and define moderate drinking are scientifically uncontrollable. Anyone with any scientific knowledge knows the study is nonsense.
But the issue of whether alcohol advertising should be restricted goes beyond what I have noted. Nowhere is this emotional issue more conspicuous than in the zealotry of protecting youth. A recent newspaper editorial reflects the hypocrisy at work here. The editorial advised banning TV alcohol advertising to protect young people. Yet I know of no newspaper publisher ready to forgo alcohol-ad revenue. Members of the print media rationalize this hypocrisy by calling television the medium that reaches most minors. The adage that it’s easy to give advice one needn’t take applies here.

Deaf to advice and blind to facts, anti-alcohol advocacy groups continue their mission to protect young people from the dissoluteness of the adult world. And they amass statistics on all kinds of problems to increase their power. During our adolescent years we tested the world by taking risks, and we made it. So will the present generation of teenagers. But there endures a sturdy, albeit insecure, band of believers dedicated to the idyllic dream of the innocent, sheltered child.

The results of a national survey of high-school students belie this perfect-child fantasy. In the study, researchers with the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario, Canada, found that 76 percent of twelfth graders and 69 percent of tenth graders in the United States drank alcohol in 1996. State surveys have shown even higher rates of consumption by young people: An analysis of four large surveys of eleventh graders in Ohio showed that 87 percent of the boys and 82 percent of the girls drank alcohol.

A book from England, *The Normal and the Abnormal in Adolescent Drinking*, provides a realistic picture of alcohol and adolescence. The authors contend that adolescent drinking is a normal part of the socialization process, wherein teenagers experiment with and acquire adult behavior. The high incidence of adolescent drinking buttresses this argument. But the authors further contend that adolescent abstinence is as deviant as excessive drinking. I agree with their position. Abstinence and excessive drinking are unhealthy extremes. Neither behavior should be encouraged, for in the real world drinking alcohol in moderation is socially acceptable.

The idea of considering teenage abstinence abnormal will shock most Americans. But evidence that most tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders in the United States drank some alcohol last year suggests that abstinence is indeed abnormal in this age group. Thus, the goal of abstinence for adolescents is unrealistic. It is common worldwide to view both abstinence and excessive drinking as abnormal. Experts in many countries do not make abstinence the only acceptable treatment goal for people recovering from alcoholism. The Puritans held that temptation was to be avoided at all costs, since it would surely lead one down the road to perdition. Are America’s all-or-nothing principles part of their legacy?

The U.S. Supreme Court made a telling point when it decided to overturn the Rhode Island ban on advertising alcoholic-beverage prices: "Keeping users of a product ignorant [in order] to manipulate their choices just doesn’t work." The time has come for us to reexamine our attitudes toward teenage drinking. Teaching adolescents how to drink sensibly is a good way to begin.

Advocacy groups claim, without evidence, that alcohol advertising encourages young people to drink. With such an easy target as alcoholic beverages, evidence seems unnecessary. And the lust to blame something or someone for youthful waywardness is so intense that parents can be
held legally responsible for their children's wanton acts.

Trying to lend young people a helping hand is, in itself, exemplary. But in their zeal, child-protection advocates may be contributing to the problems they work so hard to prevent. The cult of expertise has made parents feel incapable of raising their children. But as a parent and a psychiatrist, I trust the instincts of parents more than I do the hubris of child-protection experts.

Advertising has long been an accepted part of our daily lives. And because marketing tools are ubiquitous, some people attribute an omnipotence of sorts to Madison Avenue. Money spent on advertising a product is well spent when the advertising is directed to people inclined to purchase that product. But advertising money is wasted when the aim is to induce people to behave contrary to their wishes.

In Advertising, Alcohol Consumption, and Abuse, Joseph C. Fisher states: "I have developed a profound respect for consumers. They are not vulnerable, gullible, or easily malleable, but rather know their own minds and act accordingly." Critics claim that advertising influences young people to use "forbidden" products. They cite young people's rote responses as proof that they have been seduced. But such arguments imply that young people are like animals that respond mindlessly to stimuli.

Advocacy groups claim that alcohol advertising seduces young people to drink before they "know better," predisposing them to physiological and psychological addiction in adulthood and making freedom of choice moot. But the claim that advertising can lead anyone down the bottle-strewn garden path not only to drink alcohol but to abuse it, is pure hokum.

And reckless warnings can increase the allure of a product to people with self-destructive tendencies. According to some studies, putting warning labels on products can have the opposite effect.

Marion Winik's description of her youth in First Comes Love illustrates how anti-alcohol efforts can backfire: "The minute someone said I shouldn't do something or couldn't have something, this is not allowed, don't go there, stay away, every cell in my body rushed toward it, every synapse in my brain started firing. I had to turn that 'no' into a 'yes' or die trying."

This natural tendency to "go against the grain" is a reality of teenage life. Risk is part of growing up. Young people are not robotic anonyms and should not be regarded as such. They are human individuals and have an ancient, instinctive need to experiment. Paternalism dampens the spirit, fosters resentment, and perpetuates itself.

Events in the former Soviet Union cast doubt on the assertion that alcohol advertising causes undesirable behavior: In an attempt to stem serious nationwide alcohol-abuse problems, the Communist government banned all promotion of alcoholic beverages after which intemperance increased and Russia arguably became the world leader in drinking problems.

And so, beware! If we invoke science to dress prejudice as policy, we do not merely pervert science: We demean policy and the laws we live by as well.

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