



EUROCARE POSITION ON HEALTH WARNINGS MESSAGES

Eurocare (The European Alcohol Policy Alliance) is an alliance of some 50 voluntary and non-governmental organizations across 20 European countries working on the prevention of alcohol related harm in Europe. Member organisations are involved in research and advocacy, as well as in the provision of counselling services and residential support for problem drinkers, workplace and school based programmes and information to the public.

Eurocare regrets that the European Commission proposal on the provision of information to consumers¹ does not contain an obligation to mention any health warning messages. This is a missed opportunity for a more comprehensive approach to the reduction of alcohol related harm in Europe.

Eurocare believes labelling should be part of an integrated strategy to provide information and educate consumers about alcohol and should be part of integrated policies and programmes to reduce the harm done by alcohol.

There is a public health interest in informing consumers, by the means of labels, of the dangers and health risks associated to the consumption of alcohol; these messages could be a symbolic statement concerning the nature of the product, a low cost reminder that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity². Labelling is an important information tool which can be considered as part of a communication between producers, public authorities and consumers. However it should be noted that there is not always a clear distinction between product information and the marketing of a product.

Health warning messages should warn of the harmful effects of alcohol on health (liver cirrhosis, cancers etc), during pregnancy, when driving, operating machinery or taking certain medication and on the risk of dependence.

The health warning messages should be precise and consistent; rotating and determined by the European Institutions or Ministries of Health or appointed health bodies.

All messages and warnings should be of sufficient vividness and strength to attract consumer's attention.

The alcohol labels should have a standard format and design and be placed in a standard location on the container. They must be visible, readable, understandable and non-promotional. Must appear parallel to the base of the container, be in a box, and appear on a contrasting background (black on white) and separate and apart from other information on the label. The sizing of the label should be determined by a minimum percentage of the size of the container.

The information provided to consumers on the labels must be clear and not misleading and in a language easily understood by the consumer, (i.e. the official language(s) of the country in which the product is marketed).

The layout and location of the labels affect its utility to consumers.

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Despite the present limited European evidence for an impact of alcohol warning labels there is a body of research to inform how the impact of the health warning labels could be enhanced³. Lessons can be learned from the tobacco field regarding the impacts of tobacco warning labels, as there has been more international experience with these than with alcohol.

Some Member States, like France, the UK, Spain, Ireland, Germany or Finland have now introduced or are in the process of discussing the feasibility of the use of health warning labels on alcoholic beverages containers, notably in relation to the dangers of drinking during pregnancy

Although labelling is a means to deliver a clear message to the consumer, as a standalone measure, and in the absence of a wide range of other strategies to engage Europeans in safer alcohol use, it is unlikely that warning labels will, *on their own*, result in an overall reduction in hazardous alcohol consumption or specific risk behaviours such as drinking and driving. There is general consensus among researchers that the impact of labelling on drinking behaviour may only be minimal, warning labels can nevertheless be expected to increase knowledge, and perhaps even to change risk perceptions.

Studies show that warning labels are noticed by most drinkers, especially by young and high risk drinkers and prompt target groups to discuss health effects of drinking (especially early after their introduction)⁴. Evidence also suggests that the recall of warning labels was associated with being less likely to report having engaged in drunk driving⁵.

Public support for health warning labels

Eurobarometer 2007⁶ reports that three quarters of the European Union population (77%) would agree with putting warnings on alcohol labels and adverts to warn pregnant women and drivers of the dangers of drinking alcohol.

¹ 2008/0028 (COD) Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the provision of food information to consumers

² Babor, T., Caetano, R., Casswell, S., Edwards, G., Giesbrecht, N., Hill, L., Holder, H., Homel, R., Osterberg, E., Rehm, J., Room, R. and Rossow, I. (2003) *Alcohol: No ordinary commodity – research and public policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Andrews, J.C. (1995) The effectiveness of alcohol warning labels: A review and extension. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38(4), 622-632.

⁴ Babor, T., Caetano, R., Casswell, S., Edwards, G., Giesbrecht, N., Hill, L., Holder, H., Homel, R., Osterberg, E., Rehm, J., Room, R. and Rossow, I. (2003) *Alcohol: No ordinary commodity – research and public policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Greenfield, T. (1997) Warning Labels: Evidence on harm reduction from long-term American surveys. In: Plant, M., Single, E. and Stockwell, T. (Eds.) *Alcohol: Minimizing the harm*. London: Free Association Books.

⁵ Greenfield, T. (1997) Warning Labels: Evidence on harm reduction from long-term American surveys. In: Plant, M., Single, E. and Stockwell, T. (Eds.) *Alcohol: Minimizing the harm*. London: Free Association Books.

⁶ Eurobarometer: Attitudes towards Alcohol. June 2007.