

WARNINGS IGNORED: 40 YEARS OF INACTION ON ALCOHOL HARM

29 November 2017: Forty years ago, a progressive and prescient Senate Committee report identified alcohol and its harms as a problem of epidemic proportions.

Today, a new study examining the progress made against the landmark report's recommendations has found that despite substantive progress on drink driving, Governments have failed over the last four decades to make any significant headway in implementing effective alcohol policy to tackle the price, promotion and availability of alcohol.

Published by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, the study, *Australia, an intoxicated society: 40 Years on from the Baume Report* provides a high-level overview of progress made against the report's 37 alcohol specific recommendations.

Considered a watershed moment upon its release in 1977, the report, *Drug problems in Australia – an intoxicated society?* acknowledged for the first time that alcohol was the major drug of abuse.

Many of its strong recommendations could in fact be lifted from alcohol policy submissions put forward today.

Peter Baume, a physician, and Senator for New South Wales (1974-1991), who would later serve as Minister for Health in 1982 in the Fraser Government, chaired the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare responsible for the report.

The Baume report concluded *“any failure by governments or individuals to acknowledge that a major problem – and potential national disaster – is upon us, would constitute gross irresponsibility”*.

Informed by a desktop analysis and six key informant interviews, FARE's analysis of the Baume report grouped the report's 37 alcohol specific recommendations into eight policy intervention areas, and found progress made only in one of the eight – the area of drink driving.

Of the 13 drink driving related recommendations, some progress has been made against all of these, with eight implemented in full including the introduction of random breath testing and alcohol interlocks.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says that significant success stands in sharp relief with progress on the recommendations relating to the price, promotion and availability of alcohol; the three policy interventions proven most effective in reducing alcohol harm.

“The Baume Report recommended that ‘if nothing else, do not make alcohol more available’. By any measure, over the last 40 years, both State and Commonwealth Governments have comprehensively failed, pursuing market deregulation and industry-favourable liquor licensing reform that has



continued to increase the availability of alcohol, and as a direct result, the level of alcohol harms experienced in Australia,” Mr Thorn said.

While recommendations about the price and economic cost of alcohol fare slightly better by comparison, the current alcohol taxation system – which sees beer and spirits taxed based on alcohol content (volumetric tax), and wine taxed instead on the basis of its value (Wine Equalisation Tax) – has encouraged the production of very cheap alcohol.

Mr Thorn believes the wine industry has been given more than enough time to adjust to being taxed in line with all other alcohol products.

“Given that we’re now 40 years on from the Baume Report recommendations, and 13 separate reviews have all recommended that a volumetric tax be applied to wine, it is time for the Commonwealth Government to exercise leadership and abolish the WET,” Mr Thorn said.

The Senate Standing Committees directives regarding the area of alcohol advertising and sponsorship policy intervention were particularly strong and clear including calls for a ban on alcohol advertising on radio and television and in areas under direct Commonwealth control.

The report also recommended an appeal to sportsmen and sportswomen not to lend their name and prestige to the promotion of alcoholic beverages.

Dr Peter Baume says that appeal was clearly ignored.

“Frankly I am appalled when last year I saw the Australian cricket team with beer logos on their shirts. Back in 1977 tobacco and alcohol interests were sponsoring almost all Australian elite sport. Tobacco has now disappeared from that space, and rightfully so, but alcohol advertising in sport is unfortunately so much more prevalent and insidious than it was 40 years ago, so we’ve clearly failed to hold back that toxic tide,” Dr Baume said.

Dr Alex Wodak, Emeritus Consultant, Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent’s Hospital, says that 40 years on, we have a greater understanding of alcohol harm, and the extent of alcohol harms, but lack strong political will to stand up to the drinks industry to introduce price, availability and marketing policies known to be effective in reducing the scale of alcohol problems in Australia.

“Today, the evidence base supporting the measures best placed to address alcohol harm is stronger still. This makes the lack of progress in key alcohol policy areas all the more galling,” Dr Wodak said.

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The report, *Australia, an intoxicated society: 40 Years on from the Baume Report* will be released at an event at Parliament House (Senate Committee Room 2S3), Canberra, at 10:00am to 11:30am, Wednesday 29 November 2017. Guest speakers include Senator Richard Di Natale, Dr Peter Baume and Dr Alex Wodak. Invited speakers include the Hon Greg Hunt, Senator the Hon Scott Ryann, Hon Catherine King and Senator Stirling Griff.

Experts available for interview include:

- Dr Peter Baume, former Liberal Senator for NSW and Minister for Health, and chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare
- Dr Alex Wodak, Emeritus Consultant, Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital
- Michael Thorn, Chief Executive, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation's greatest preventive health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia.