16th December 2016

Re: Submission to the Review of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998

In what follows I make a submission arguing to: (1) alter the Victorian Liquor Act to no longer allow children under age 18 to consume alcohol in licensed premises; and (2) raise the legal age for purchasing alcohol in Victoria to 21.

(1) Alter the Victorian Liquor Act to no longer allow children under age 18 to consume alcohol in licensed premises

Progress has made in recent years in Victoria and across Australia in discouraging alcohol use amongst secondary school aged children. The scale of these reductions is striking. As one example the Australian School Student Survey of Alcohol and Drug Use reported in 2002, 29% of 12-15 year old students used alcohol in the past seven days. By 2011 this had dropped eighteen percentage points down to 11%.

In my contact with children and their parents they state young people are reducing under-age alcohol use in awareness that alcohol is damaging to the developing brain. A common question being asked by parents, young people and researchers in recent years is why the Victorian Liquor Act is different to all other Australian states in allowing alcohol to be used by youth under age 18 in licensed premises? The Victorian Act allows this if children are accompanied by an older adult and the alcohol is consumed in the context of a meal. A recent publication (Rowland et al, 2014) found that living in Victorian municipalities with high numbers of venues with restaurant and café liquor licenses had a detrimental effect in increasing parent provision of alcohol to children in migrant families. These effects are understood to be due to migrant’s role modelling behaviour where they witness Australian parents allowing their children to use alcohol in restaurants and cafés. Role modelling of this type is destructive given the clear evidence that alcohol use is harmful to children and families. In this context I strongly urge the Victorian Government to come into line with all Australian states and permit no alcohol use for youth under 18.

(2) Raise the legal age for purchasing alcohol in Victoria to 21.

The previous review of the Victorian Liquor Act stated that if progress was not made in reducing youth alcohol problems, consideration should be given to raising the legal age for alcohol purchase to age 21 in Victoria. Recent data reveal that youth alcohol-related harm has in fact been rising in Victoria in recent decades (e.g., VicHealth, 2016). In a previous paper Australian public health advocates have outlined the strong research and policy evidence for raising the age for alcohol purchase to 21 (Toumbourou et al, 2014). A policy change of this nature will no doubt be carefully assessed not simply for research evidence but also for public support.

In my contact with parents and their children in Victoria they state they are aware that the brain is not fully developed at age 18. In ever increasing numbers, they are asking “why does the
Victorian Liquor Act allow age 18 youth to purchase alcohol when there is now clear evidence that youth remain biologically vulnerable to alcohol’s effects at age 18?”

In this context I recommend that a randomised trial be designed and funded for alcohol serving organisations such as clubs, cafes and restaurants that wish to volunteer to trial an age 21 purchase policy. I propose selecting businesses that volunteer in locations with high-levels of problems amongst alcohol users in the 18 to 20 age group. The trial would evaluate the hypothesis that raising the alcohol purchasing age from 18 to 21 will reduce alcohol-related incidents (death, injury, crime) enhance public amenity (perceived safety), and receive public support as a progressive action by the Victorian Government and have no detrimental impacts on business performance.

Yours Sincerely,

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References cited: