Alcohol and Cancer Warnings: Policy Developments and Legal Challenges

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Introduction / Issues: Alcohol is a known carcinogen and causally linked to cancer in seven sites in the body (Connor, 2017), but knowledge of this link remains low across most populations. Labels on packaged alcoholic beverages are recommended by the WHO as a means of providing key health information to consumers.

Method / Approach: This paper uses legal and public policy methods to map and analyse the current and proposed laws and policies relating to alcohol and cancer warnings. It then uses legal methods to study the legal challenges to these policy developments. The paper covers national, European Union and international law.

Key Findings OR Results: Labels warning about the links between alcohol and cancer have been introduced in South Korea and Ireland and are being considered in the European Union. They were also trialled in the Yukon Territories in Canada. However, alcohol-producing countries and the alcohol industry are vehemently opposed to alcohol and cancer warning labels and are using legal avenues to challenge cancer warning labels, including through the World Trade Organization.

Discussions and Conclusions: The legal challenges to the new alcohol and cancer warning labels represent another strategy by the alcohol industry to undermine constructive public health policies. The challenges may not succeed but they threaten to impede or slow the implementation of sound public health measures. Australia should not oppose the law and cancer warnings implemented by other countries, despite its significant wine-exporting interests.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Australia took the significant step of introducing alcohol and pregnancy warnings in 2020. It is considering energy labelling on alcoholic beverages in 2023. The next step for Australia should be to begin the process of developing alcohol and cancer labels through Food Standards Australia New Zealand.

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