



Is New Zealand lagging behind other OECD countries in measures to reduce alcohol-related harm?

The need to improve measures to reduce alcohol consumption and hazardous drinking in New Zealand has become particularly topical in New Zealand following the release of a report by the Law Commission¹ and Government's response to this report, announced on 23 August 2010. This concern is appropriate given the high burden of harm to health (and particularly for Māori health)² in New Zealand. Indeed, alcohol is second only to tobacco as a cause of lost disability-adjusted-life-years (DALYs) in high-income countries according to recent global burden of disease work by the World Health Organization (WHO).³

The public and taxpayers should particularly welcome measures which aim to reduce alcohol-related harm given that some of the interventions may be cost saving to government (e.g. alcohol taxation and advertising restrictions)^{4,5} or at least be relatively cost-effective.⁶ The measures that may be implemented include increasing the age of alcohol purchase at off licences (including supermarkets) to 20 years, banning the sale of premixed drinks with high alcohol content that appeal to youth, and giving more power to local communities to influence the location, density and opening hours of alcohol outlets. However, the Government has missed opportunities to reduce harm from alcohol by delaying or ruling out the introduction of evidence-based measures such as lowering the legal blood alcohol limit for all drivers, introducing restrictions on alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship and increasing alcohol taxation.

Methods—To put the current New Zealand discussions into a wider context, we examined how current policies compare with other OECD countries. Data were obtained from the WHO Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH) (see <http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/default.asp>) and the World Health Organization Global Status Report on Alcohol Policy.⁷ For comparison purposes we used data only from OECD countries with fairly complete data on key indicators.

Results and discussion—Table 1 shows alcohol policies in 19 OECD countries for which data are available. Besides New Zealand, only three other countries in this table have a high blood alcohol limit of 80mg for drivers, although in the UK a report by NICE recently recommended lowering the limit to 50mg.⁸ In Canada, all provinces except Montreal had a limit of 50mg up until this year (2010). As might be expected, opposition to the change was intense, with the bar industry in Quebec being quoted as concerned at dropping beer sales and bar closures.⁹ The Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland) have historically had stronger alcohol policies, although their inclusion into the European Union has meant freer access to alcohol and higher alcohol consumption,¹⁰ although deaths from liver cirrhosis (except in Finland) remain much lower than the rest of Europe.¹¹

Table 2 shows restrictions on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of alcohol in 19 OECD countries, many of which have introduced voluntary and/or statutory

regulation of advertising. Here we rank New Zealand as having the weakest restrictions—except for Belgium.

Table 1. Age limits for serving alcohol, blood alcohol level driving limits and off license restrictions in 19 OECD countries (2008 data)

OECD country	Blood alcohol level limit (in mgs†) for all drivers	Age limit for on premise alcohol purchase*	Age limit for off licence alcohol purchase*	Off licence restrictions on alcohol sales‡ by outlet density
Austria	50	16	16	No
Australia	50	18	18	No
Belgium	50	16 (18)	0 (18)	No
Canada	80	18	18	No
Denmark	50	16	16	No
Finland	50	18	18 (20)	Yes (s, w)
France	50	16 (18)	16	Yes (w, b)
Germany	50	16 (18)	16	No
Iceland	50	20	20	Yes (s, w, b)
Ireland	80	18	18	No
Italy	50	16	0	No
Netherlands	50	16 (18)	16 (18)	No
New Zealand	80	18	18	No
Norway	50	18 (20)	18 (20)	Yes (s, w, b)
Portugal	50	16	16	No
Spain	50	16	16	No
Sweden	20	18	18 (20 + wine)	No
Switzerland	50	16 (18)	16 (18)	No
United Kingdom	80	16 (18)	18	-

Data from World Health Organization Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH) (“-” means data not given)

*Age for service of spirits given in brackets if different to that for beer and wine; †Blood alcohol is the amount of alcohol present in a 100mL sample of blood, therefore 50mg is 0.05g of alcohol in 100mL (also 0.05% or 50mg/dL); ‡ Sales of beer (b) wine (w) and/or spirits (s);

A causal link between alcohol advertising and consumption is hotly contested but advertising does influence the drinking patterns and attitudes of young people¹² and advertising restrictions are widely considered to be one strand in a range of measures that can reduce alcohol-related harms.¹³

Table 3 shows excise taxes for beer, wine and spirits in 2004 (on countries for which data are available). New Zealand has below average taxation rates compared to many other OECD countries, particularly for its preferred national beverage, beer.

This analysis is very brief and many additional details would improve the quality of such international comparisons. Nevertheless, the results indicate that New Zealand is lagging behind the OECD laws on most of a range of evidence-based measures to reduce the harm caused by alcohol consumption.

Table 2. Restrictions on advertising, promotion and sponsorship in 19 OECD countries (2008) and ordered by regulatory intensity (authors' judgement)

OECD country	Restrictions on beer billboard ads	Restrictions on beer ads at point of sale	Restrictions on beer ads in print media	Restrictions on beer product placement on national TV	Restrictions on national TV beer ads	Restrictions on bar promotions (free alcohol)*	Restrictions on sponsorship of sports
Sweden	Total ban	Partial statutory restriction	Total ban				
Norway	Total ban			No restrictions	Total ban		
Iceland	Total ban					Partial statutory restriction (w); no restrictions (other)	Partial statutory restriction
France	No restrictions	Partial statutory restriction		Total ban		Total ban (w); no restriction (other)	Total ban
Switzerland	Partial statutory restriction	No restriction	Partial statutory restriction	Total ban		Partial statutory restriction; total ban (bc s; s)	Partial statutory restriction (b,w); total ban (s)
United Kingdom	Partial statutory restriction			Total ban	-	Partial statutory restriction	Voluntary/self-regulated
Finland	Partial statutory restriction					Partial statutory restriction (bc b; w); total ban (other)	Partial statutory restriction (b,w); total ban (s)
Italy	Partial statutory restriction			By voluntary agreement	Partial statutory restriction		
Canada	Partial statutory restriction			No restrictions	Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions	
Australia	Voluntary/self-regulated	No restrictions	Voluntary/self-regulated	No restrictions	Total ban	Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions
Spain	Partial statutory restriction		Voluntary/self-regulated	No restrictions	Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions	
Denmark	Voluntary/self-regulated			Total ban	Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions	

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Germany	Voluntary/self-regulated			Total ban	Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions	
Portugal	No restrictions			Partial statutory restriction		Partial statutory restriction; no restrictions (bc)	Partial statutory restriction
Ireland	Voluntary/self-regulated			Partial statutory restriction		Voluntary/self-regulated (w); no restrictions (bc); partial statutory restriction (s,b)	Voluntary/self-regulated
Austria	No restrictions			Partial statutory restriction	No restrictions		
Netherlands	Voluntary/self-regulated			No restrictions	Voluntary/self-regulated		
New Zealand	No restrictions					Partial statutory restriction; no restrictions (bc)	Voluntary/self-regulated
Belgium	No restrictions						

Data from World Health Organization Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH) (“-” means data not given).

*Free alcohol includes beer, spirits, wine and below-cost beer, spirits and wine; bc = below cost; b=beer, w=wine, s=spirits.

Table 3. Taxes on beer, wine and spirits (2008), ordered from highest overall average tax to lowest

OECD country	Tax as a percentage of retail price		
	Beer	Wine	Spirits
Finland	47.7	37.3	59.9
Iceland	40.1	35.4	52.7
Norway	14.5	42.1	71
Belgium	23.9	33	53.5
New Zealand	59.4	12.8	33.8
Sweden	11.7	34.6	50.1
Ireland	21.5	25.7	44
Denmark	31.9	15.4	42
Netherlands	25	16.8	45.4
Switzerland	46	0	38.7
United Kingdom	7.7	42.2	11.9
Australia	38.1	0	15.7
Hungary	21.6	0	28.4
France	3.8	1.2	22.5
Portugal	0.4	0	24.9
Austria	13.9	0	10
Canada	3.2	2.1	12.7

Data from World Health Organization Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH).

A recent report to the European Commission on evidence-based policies that would be effective and cost-effective in reducing social, economic and health harms from alcohol included:

- Lowering blood alcohol limits for driving,
- Increasing alcohol taxes,
- Reducing the volume of alcohol advertising in all media (acknowledging that self-regulation was not effective),
- Restrictions to alcohol sales (acknowledging that these were only effective if adequately enforced), and
- Encouraging brief advice interventions in primary care.¹³

Some steps towards achieving these policies have been made by the recent announcement of the New Zealand Government to review the liquor laws, but much more can be done to better protect public health from alcohol-related harm.

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