



Policy Briefing: Product Labelling

Why the need for product labelling? We now see more unit labelling on drinks than ever before, yet consumption and harm is still on the increase. Many people are grossly exceeding what is considered to be the acceptable 'safe' limit due to factors such as:

- strength of products increasing. What was once a standard strength for beer or lager has now disappeared to make way for premium beers which have an increased alcoholic strength.
- measure size, particularly in the case of wine. Many pubs now serve 175ml glasses or even bigger (250ml).

We believe that the unit system and alcoholic content of products is confusing which impacts upon understanding of recommended levels.

- The switch in 1994 from weekly to daily limits has not helped to reduce our binge drinking culture nor has it made it any clearer to people how much they are actually drinking.
- There is a lack of understanding (or a misunderstanding) about the units in an alcoholic product and weekly or daily limits.
- We either need to re-invent the word 'unit' or devise another clearer definition. *"The measurement of units is complicated and cumbersome"* (1).
- Many people are confused about any possible health benefits of alcohol (the fact that they only apply to certain age groups and in very small amounts – indeed there are no benefits that cannot be achieved from a healthy, well balanced diet).
- We need a clearer and more easily understood sensible drinking message.

What are the problems with unit labelling? There is an argument that since unit labelling started appearing on products, stronger brands have gained market share (some people are actively seeking products with higher strength). This is a difficult area as it needs to be weighed up against not informing the public about the potential harm to their health by remaining unclear about their consumption.

"Alcohol is a poison – too much in one go can be lethal, too much week after week kills you more slowly" (2).

Alcohol Focus Scotland calls for a radical overhaul of the unit concept and sensible drinking message, in conjunction with the medical profession.

Alcohol Focus Scotland calls for all alcoholic products sold in Scotland to clearly show:

- **units contained in product set against context of recommended levels/responsible consumption**
- **health warnings, particularly for at risk groups e.g. pregnant women**

(1)(2) British Medical Association