Communicating Messages About Drinking

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One arm of an alcohol misuse prevention strategy is the introduction of health warnings on alcohol products. Governments and across the world are responding to the World Health Organisation's "call for action by to reduce the harmful use of alcohol" (WHO, 2010). One example is the European Commission's response to the WHO call with a report regarding the mandatory labelling of the list of ingredients and the nutrition declaration of alcoholic beverages (EC, 2017). Notably, the report concluded that "the Commission has not identified objective grounds that would justify the absence of information on ingredients and nutrition information on alcoholic beverages." However, the report failed to address if warnings rather than ingredient and nutritional information are appropriate or beneficial for harm reduction.

Support for alcohol warning policies among citizens is high (Greenfield *et al.*, 2007; European Commission, 2010) yet some researchers have questioned the efficacy of alcohol warning labels and concluded that evidence of their influence on changing behaviour is very limited (e.g. Coomber *et al*., 2015; Stockley, 2001). A number of areas remain under-researched and new evidence would provide insight into how warning labels can be more effective. One problem with past research has been the reliance on the American experience in understanding the impact of warning labels. The American warnings are small, text-based, and predominantly focus on specific instances when alcohol consumption should be avoided (e.g., when driving or operating machinery). However recently there has been an upsurge in interest in warning label formats and designs as evidenced by the contributions to this Special Issue. The Special Issue Guest Editors organised a British Academy funded workshop in the UK in November 2016 with an aim to advance understanding of what might work, in fostering low risk consumption of alcohol in line with governmental guidelines, by the use of warning messages in various forms and settings. A wider call for contributions solicited numerous submissions leading to a balanced set of high standard manuscripts presented in this Special Issue. We would like to thank all the authors and reviewers who contributed to this Special Issue of Alcohol and Alcoholism for their excellent work. We also express our gratitude to the Editor in Chief, Jonathan Chick, for his invitation to act as Guest Editors for this Special Issue.

Moss and Albery set the scene for this Special Issue with a systematic review evaluating the effectiveness of responsible drinking messages (RDMs). Overall, they found weak support of the beneficial effects of RDMs on alcohol use. These authors highlight the paucity of research on RDMs with the systematic review having identified only eight studies for inclusion. Further, the review revealed an inconsistent approach to message design and evaluation.

The effects of specific (low risk) drinking guidelines are addressed in three papers. Vallance *et al*. using a focus group methodology in Canada find that consumers strongly support enhanced alcohol warning labels. These warning labels include standard drink information, low risk guidelines, as well as risk information. Their work extends and deepens the research reported by Hobin *et al*. that used experimental methods to investigate the potential of such enhanced labels. The experimental study by Hobin *et al.* identified that alcohol warning labels adding 'standard drink' (13.45 grams or 17.05ml of ethanol) information to Canadian's low risk drinking guideline information may improve drinkers' ability to monitor their drinking. However, Maynard *et al.* found no evidence to support a claim that providing unit (one unit equal 8 grams or 10ml of pure alcohol) and/or calorie information would have a beneficial

effect on alcohol consumption among UK students. Moreover, Maynard *et al*.'s findings showed the potential for such information to lead to negative unintended consequences.

The results of Frings *et al*. provide important information on the potential for research work undertaken in traditional lab settings to show increased effectiveness of RDMs. Their study compared attention, using an eye-tracking methodology, to a control versus an RDM poster across two settings and found that in the traditional lab setting more attention was paid to the RDM than in the bar setting. No differences were found in consumption using a pseudo taste preference task. The authors concluded that the environment context in which RDMs are displayed impacts on their effectiveness. Therefore, researchers need to take note as most studies evaluating RDMs and warning labels do not take place in real life contexts and as a result their findings are less likely to reflect reality. That said, experiment field studies such as that of Berger and Rand (2008) do show that reductions in alcohol consumption can be gained through exposure to RDMs in low alcohol cue contexts (dorms of students) given attention to the message used in the campaign i.e., the success of an identity focused appeal over a traditional RDM.

A theoretical approach, such as that argued for and undertaken by Pham *et al.* would be of benefit to the field. Their findings use an eye-tracking methodology and underpinned by the Communications-Human Information Processing model (Laughery and Wogalter, 2014) found that colour and size are both important in increasing the amount of attention paid to the warning. Overall, currently the literature on RDMs and alcohol warnings in fragmented with a wide variety of message themes and formats without replications and adequate use of theory.

Longitudinal and population level investigations are represented in this Special Issue by the paper from Martin *et al.*, who found a mass-media (TV breast cancer awareness advertising) campaign resulted in increased awareness and support for alcohol control policy at the population level. However, their study failed to evidence a change in drinking intentions. Longitudinal and population level studies are central in the evaluation of policy implementations and provide strong evidence to guide researchers, policy makers and practitioners. More research based on such methods is needed.

Moving forward, much more attention is needed by researchers on the specific theme and content of warning labels and RDMs. Currently the literature in fragmented with a wide variety of message themes and formats without replications. Researchers should also focus their research efforts to gain a better understanding of current warning labels and their potential extensions. We are pleased to see that many authors of the Special Issue have indeed examined current practices from a variety of countries (e.g., Canada, Australia). As a result, the findings and conclusions have relevance for practitioners and policy-makers, and as a result, have a higher chance of impact beyond academia. Given the well documented negative effects of excessive alcohol consumption on health, the economy, as well as the social impact for individuals and society, timely and evidenced-based improvements to current policies are vital. Given that harm from alcohol have the potential to affect all societies, more attention is needed on the effectiveness of warning labels used in less well-developed economies such as those of Latin American countries (see WHO reports for countries that have alcohol warning label policies).

Responding to the WHO call the UK Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA, 2017) reported that only 1 label out of 315 informed UK consumers of the UK Government's low-risk weekly guideline, 15 months after the modified guideline was announced in the UK. With growing public support there is likely a move by governments toward mandatory labelling of all alcohol products. However, more research is needed before we can offer policy makers strong evidence to enact such a policy.

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