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VICTORIANS CALL FOR HEALTH LABELLING ON ALCOHOL PRODUCTS

A survey commissioned by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) has found that 85 percent of people interviewed support the introduction of labels detailing health information on alcohol products.

The state-wide telephone survey of more than 1500 Victorians, conducted in February and March 2009, is believed to be the first in Australia to measure community attitudes across a variety of alcohol-related issues.

Releasing data today, VicHealth Chief Executive Officer Todd Harper said; "The message is clear. Victorians support mandatory consumer information labels on all alcohol products, so they can make more informed decisions about their drinking."

The *VicHealth Community Attitude Survey to Alcohol Policy 2009* asked people a range of questions including their drinking habits, their views on the accessibility and advertising of alcohol, how they thought alcohol should be taxed and whether they supported labels on alcoholic beverage containers.

Survey respondents rated their support for the following specific details on alcohol labels:

- 85 per cent supported recommended daily guidelines for low risk alcohol consumption;
- 89 per cent supported a warning message advising that exceeding the recommended guidelines may be harmful;
- 91 per cent supported health warnings for specific groups – eg pregnant women, young people;
- 76 per cent supported nutritional information
- 86 per cent supported a list of ingredients
- 93 per cent supported details of type of alcohol used in premixed drinks
- 95 per cent supported a standardised display on the number of standard drinks in the container; and
- 96 per cent supported a standardised display of the alcohol content.

"The significance of these responses lies in the attitudinal change of Victorians. Nine out of every ten people agreed that alcohol is a serious issue in our community," said Mr Harper.

According to the VicHealth Chief Executive, communicating health messages to consumers through product packaging is an efficient and effective way to reduce harm. He pointed to the success of tobacco pack labels as a good example.

Professor Robin Room, of the Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre in Melbourne said; "product labels can serve a number of purposes including providing information about the product to the consumer.

"Adding health information to alcohol products also helps to establish an understanding in the community that alcohol is a special and hazardous commodity," Prof Room explained.

Australian alcohol producers and manufacturers who export their products to the US already label their products with a health warning to meet the requirements of the US government.

“Why is it that we add health warnings for foreign consumers but we don’t give the same information to Australian consumers,” asked Mr Harper.

Following on from the survey, VicHealth developed sample labels for bottles, cans and casks containing alcohol and asked Victorian drinkers what they thought of the various designs and which labels would most likely impact them personally.

Those interviewed included underage drinkers aged 16-17 years, young adult drinkers aged 18-24 years, and parents of 15-18 year olds.

“In fact there appeared to be an expectation among those interviewed that health information and warning labels will be introduced on alcohol sooner rather than later, “explained Mr Harper.

The interviews found that awareness of the health consequences associated with alcohol was quite limited.

Participants generally supported the notion that the labels could provide them with information to increase their knowledge about the effects of alcohol.

“Victorians said they most preferred labels that told them something they did not already know. They wanted facts presented in simple, clear, and unambiguous language.

“Health information and warning labels alone will not reduce the harms caused by alcohol, but this latest research shows that if they are introduced as part of a comprehensive suite of measures, they can help to change Australia’s drinking culture for the better, “ Mr Harper added.