

## Alcohol and youth: a response to Professor Casswell's letter

Dear NZMJ,

I note with interest Sally Casswell's letter in the most recent NZMJ.<sup>1</sup> She writes:

"Which brings me to a final relevant issue in the media coverage of this story: while there were no comments from the vested interest groups, producers or retailers, one *NZ Herald* story did quote Dr Eric Crampton, a University of Canterbury economist, who said the video was shocking because 'rare and sad events are shocking'. He also said 'while several prominent anti-alcohol commentators have used this tragic case to argue for higher alcohol prices and broader restrictions on where alcohol can be sold, the overall statistics on youth drinking suggest that things are improving'.

Dr Crampton was referring a decrease in the proportion of young drinkers classified as hazardous drinkers or binge drinkers in recent surveys. The Ministry of Health (MoH) NZ Health Survey for example, reported 1 in 5 of those aged 15–17 years were hazardous drinkers (down from about 1 in 4 in 2006/7). There is no doubt there is some improvement but whether enough to argue against improved alcohol control policies is another question.

The University press release and *NZ Herald* story did not contextualise this 'expert' opinion, but in a recent news item it was announced that Dr Crampton and the University of Canterbury had accepted 3 years of funding from the Brewers Association of New Zealand."

Here's some context, if your readers would be interested.

The University of Canterbury's media person contacted me requesting a press release on this issue. I was not inclined to comment on the case, knowing nothing of the circumstances of the 9-year-old in the video. But I was then disappointed to hear repeated instances of anti-alcohol commenters suggesting that this case served as exemplar of a worsening trend in youth drinking. I consequently wrote a release focusing on results from the most recent Ministry of Health and Auckland Youth '12 data that show that youth drinking has been decreasing.

I also insisted that the last line of the press release note what might be perceived as a conflict of interest. It reads, "*Dr Crampton is a senior lecturer in economics at UC. He also advises the Brewers Association of Australia and New Zealand on alcohol economics and policy.*"<sup>2</sup> I forwarded a copy of the release to the Brewers Association as a courtesy; it was the first time that I had talked with them about the matters discussed in the release. They did not request or initiate the release.

It is strictly incorrect for Casswell to insinuate that I was hiding any potential conflicts; they're noted in the press release. My full disclosure statement has been up on my blog, *Offsetting Behaviour*,<sup>3</sup> since the University entered into this arrangement with the Brewers to facilitate my work, and were also announced in a separate press release in December. It is also incorrect to suggest that my press release pointing to the actual statistics on youth drinking were in any way motivated by this arrangement.

I just get annoyed when policy activists try to mislead the public about the underlying statistics. And I continue to be amazed by those who think tax increases are the appropriate way of dealing with those adults who think it hilarious to get 9 year olds drunk.

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### **References and endnotes:**

1. Casswell S. Marketing and supplying alcohol to young people. N Z Med J. 2014;127(1388).  
<http://journal.nzma.org.nz/journal/127-1388/5985/content.pdf>
2. The full release is archived at Scoop: <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/AK1401/S00225/video-showing-a-drunk-nine-year-old-shocking-for-good-reason.htm>
3. My disclosures statement is here: <http://offsettingbehaviour.blogspot.com/2013/12/alcohol-work.html>