**Under the influence: protecting teens from the impact of alcohol**

**Date: June 21 2011**

*The European parliament held a lunch seminar on June 21 2011 aiming to address the issue of alcohol marketing’s effect on young people’s drinking and wellbeing. Please see below for details:*

**Anna Hedh (S&D, SE)** introduced the seminar by saying that alcohol has a positive image and it is associated with celebrations etc. However Europe is the heaviest region (average European adult drinks 11 litres per year) and this has a negative effect on health, she noted. Teens’ drinking and their exposure to marketing are two urgent problems that need to be tackled and this is the focus of the session. 60% of 15-16 year olds have drunken alcohol in the last month and the average amount they drink is 60 gr. per occasion (1.5 litres of beer). Underage alcohol consumption is associated with irreparable damage to the developing brain, increased likelihood of dependence, traffic accidents, risky sexual behaviour, violence and depression, to name but a few issues. Sophisticated marketing and product placement are rife and evidence shows that alcohol promotion has a strong effect on young people’s behaviour. It heightens the chance of young people starting to drink alcohol, and for those who already do drink, it leads to them drinking more. Reducing exposure of young people to alcohol marketing is a key public health priority, she stressed. Recent EU funded projects have looked into the current marketing regulatory systems around Europe and they have concluded that these still allow many successful promotional techniques to take place. Alcohol advertising should be only allowed in media aimed at adults and should only refer to the qualities of the product such as degree, origin, composition and means of production (i.e. product advertising), instead of suggesting that successful lifestyles can be attained by the use of the product, (i.e. lifestyle advertising).

*Impact of alcohol marketing on young people’s drinking behaviour*

**Prof. Gerard Hastings,** from the **Institute for Social Marketing** in the UK, made the following points in his presentation. Please refer to the slides for details:

* Evidence shows that alcohol marketing has a strong impact on young people’s drinking (when they start and how much they drink) so there is a policy need for action.
* Marketing efforts include: Mass media advertising but there are less direct means for marketers to get their message across (point of sales, product placement, new media, packaging, price promotion etc). Also the ubiquity of alcohol, price and product design have a big impact on promoting consumption. The cumulative impact of this is enormous.
* In some countries like in the UK the Alcohol industry is very close to governments in determining what alcohol policy will be and that is also a problem.
* Alcohol Marketing is multifaceted, driven by consumer research, strategic and is long term. Its goal is to increase shareholder value.
* A longitudinal study was carried out by them on this, which concluded that alcohol marketing is very ubiquitous. Young people are being bombarded continually with marketing messages. 96% percent of 13-15 year olds had been exposed to alcohol marketing via at least 5 different channels. These pro-drinking messages have an impact on when people start to drink and how much they drink.
* A UK government study, as well as other specialist studies came to the same conclusion (among them the report from the Science Committee of the EU Alcohol and Health Forum).
* Similar conclusions were reached on tobacco and energy dense foods.
* He pointed out that it would be nonsensical for the Alcohol industry to spend as much as 800 million pounds per year on alcohol marketing (as is the case in the UK) if it didn’t increase sales.
* He talked about the nature of alcohol marketing and said that trying to control their content is impossible given the subtleties and insidiousness of marketing communications.
* He used the example of the [Carling ‘Belong’ campaign](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHHfynLYW1I) which was very dodgy because it was very close to violating UK self-regulatory code that states that alcohol should not be linked with social success, social acceptance or popularity. The message is very subtle.
* He talked about how alcohol producers use music and sport sponsorship to get their message across. *“Ultimately, the band are the heroes at the venue and* [producer] *should use them to ‘piggy back’ and engage customers [sic] emotions”*
* He concluded that the subtleties of marketing techniques like branding and sponsorship defy content regulation so the only solution is to control the amount of marketing as the French have done through the Loi Evin.
* The UK is seeking to do that through a private members bill although private members bills do not tend to be successful.

A representative from the **UK Advertising Standards Authority** **(SA)**, on the Carling ‘Belong’ example explained that this had been quite a controversial decision at the time. He admitted that such decisions are often subjective but that since that time, there has been a review by the bodies and the SA would probably take a different approach now. There are many self-regulatory organisations (SROs) around Europe, often made up of individual members of the public like teachers and local authority staff. Overall, they do get it right, and have tackled advertisers who have broken the rules.

**Prof. Gerard Hastings** responded by asking how the news this week of Budweiser sponsoring the World Cup was received by UK regulators considering that there is a regulation in place against linking alcohol and sporting prowess and youth cultures in advertising.

The representative from the **SA** replied that they do not regulate sponsorship. That is done by the Portman Group, but the SA looks at the adverts themselves. He explained as well that they rely on complaints from individuals to be their eyes and ears, and so encouraged people to make complains against adverts if they thought they were problematic.

**Prof. Gerard Hastings** explained to the room that the Portman Group is funded by the alcohol industry.

**Nessa Childers (S&D, IE)** spoke to say that the criteria used to ban questionable adverts can be quite complicated. In her opinion the only way forward was to impose a ban on advertising all together because it would be very difficult to develop criteria that would actually use the ideas of unconscious stimulation of desire and ban them.

**Marian Harkin (ALDE, IE)** asked whether there was any evidence to show that were we have controlled the amount this works.

**Prof. Gerard Hastings** replied that there was, and that this could be seen on a global scale with the banning of tobacco advertising in many countries. Less people are taking up smoking in those countries. The more comprehensive the ban, the bigger the effect, he said.

*Young people’s perceptions of alcohol marketing*

**Jan Peloza**, from the **Alcohol Policy Youth Network (APYN)** made the following contributions in his presentation:

* He talked about the work of APYN and its members.
* He listed the three stages in which alcohol marketing works; liking the advert, the desire to emulate the featured characters, the belief that acting in this way will lead to positive benefits.
* Young people want to be cool and alcohol adverts often use humour, sexual and social success, attractive images and people.
* The full effect of exposure to marketing is cumulative.

**Katherine Brown,** from the **Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS)** represented the group of youth researchers that conducted a Europe-wide study on young people and alcohol marketing. Please refer to slides for details and specific figures and percentages.

* They are still in the process of analysing the results – the final report will be ready in autumn 2011.
* The study had two parts: 1) an online survey (over 1000 responses across 41 countries in Europe) and 2) a pilot study where 17 young people from 14 countries recorded how often they were exposed to alcohol marketing during two days.
* Sneak preview of the results:
* The average age of people having their first drink was 14.
* Respondents who started drinking earlier reported drinking more heavily now.
* Taste, price and strength were the top three factors that influenced them to decide which alcohol to buy.
* Top 5 situations where they were exposed to alcohol marketing: Bars, supermarkets, TV, sporting events, magazines.
* Half of the people owned some piece of alcohol merchandise.
* 69% found that alcohol advertising influenced youth perception of alcohol.
* 77% thought advertising should carry health warnings.
* 45% thought that alcohol advertising should be banned completely.

*How to regulate alcohol marketing to protect young people*

**Wim van Dalen**, from the **Dutch Institute for Alcohol Policy** stated in his presentation that:

* The EC funded FASE project (Focus on alcohol safe environments) looked into the conditions regulations must meet in order to protect young people most effectively from exposure to marketing that is likely to have an impact on their drinking behaviour.
* In order to find that they conducted an extensive literature review (110 articles), inventoried marketing regulations in 23 EU countries and did some case studies.
* The results of the study show that:
* Volume restrictions are effective if they substantially reduce the total volume of alcohol advertising and have no significant substitution effects.
* Content restrictions are effective if they include all elements that make advertising appealing to young people. Youth perceptions need to be considered.
* He referred to a detailed list of criteria that make a regulatory system effective: Regulation embedded in regulatory context, commitment of stakeholders (policy makers, civil society and industry), transparency, mandatory pre-screening, effective complaint system, independent jury, substantial sanctions that act as a deterrent, systematic monitoring which is independent from commercial interests, all types of marketing practices are covered and flexibility.
* France has one of the most protective systems in Europe.
* Content restrictions in self regulatory codes and statutory regulations are very similar. What differentiates the two regulatory systems is that self regulatory codes never include volume restrictions, they focus on content.
* Referring to the AMMIE project, he said that 5 countries worked together to look at alcohol marketing practices and measure the volume of alcohol marketing. Exposure statistics showed an alarming number of adverts young people are exposed to. For example, a young person (13-17) in Germany see at least 1.5 adverts a day on television.
* Recommendations: Time ban – easy to monitor, and effective. We need one from 6am to 11pm.

*Young people’s evaluation of self-regulatory systems*

**Tiziana Codenotti**, from **Eurocare Italia**, presenting the findings of another part of the AIMME project that compared the opinion of the self-regulatory bodies and that of young people, said that:

* They wanted to know what young people thought about the adverts. She explained the methodology of the project.
* Deliverables of this 2 year project include: reports on trends in marketing, complaints and complaining systems, exposure of young people and alcohol related sports’ sponsorship
* The Italian partners filed 26 complaints with the Self-regulatory body; 11 (29%) were upheld, 20 (53%) not upheld and 7 (18%)‏ got no answer.
* 199 complaints against 84 advertisements were filed in the 5 countries that took part in the project: 72% not upheld, 23% upheld. She showed some of the complaints filed: One complaint focussed on an advert using cartoons, but regulators responded saying that cartoons do not necessarily relate to children. Another example from the Netherlands dealt with a ‘decorate your own bottle’ advertising campaign, which caught the eye of minors in their study, the complaint was not upheld because the campaign was not “specifically” targeting minors. The Italian Artic advert talk of ’breaking the ice’ which undeniably associates alcohol with social acceptance and wellbeing, the complaint was not upheld. The Heineken shoe cupboard/beer cupboard advert in Denmark was excused by regulators because of its humorous nature. Many complaints were not upheld (72%).
* Comparing the decisions of the self-regulatory bodies and the youth panels, she showed that they only coincided in 12 cases out of 69. And in 0 cases when the complaints were about appeal to youth/targeting minors.
* One of the problems is that the formulation of articles in the self-regulatory codes is too narrow.
* Two examples:

- Alcohol advertising may not “specifically” be aimed at young people: it allows for ads appealing to young people as well as adults

 - Alcohol advertising should not suggest that their alcohol use leads to social, sexual or sportive success, but it can still associate drinking alcohol these types of success.

* The use of humour is very appealing to youth and it is not in any of the marketing regulations.
* Many alcohol advertisements contain features from youth culture (animations, music, colours, etc).
* The use of irony often legitimates elements which are in breach with the codes.
* She recommended the review of existing regulations, to avoid confusions regulations should specify what is allowed rather than what is not allowed as in the French Loi evin.
* Alcohol adverts should be evaluated according to young people’s interpretations and not the intention of the advertisers.
* Effective regulation of alcohol advertising covers both the content and the volume of alcohol advertising.

*Talking about an alcohol marketing ban…why not?*

**Wim van Dalen** spoke about the legal possibility of an EU-wide ban on alcohol marketing to say that:

* It is possible to have an EU alcohol marketing ban like the tobacco ban. A ban on alcohol advertising is not in conflict with EU law; we have Sweden, Norway and France as examples.
* Such a ban can be justified on health grounds (Article 30 of the EC Treaty) given the clear link between exposure to alcohol advertising and youth alcohol drinking behavior.
* Alternatively, a European ban can be justified on economic grounds; harmonization of the marketing regulations will eliminate unfair competition between Member States.
* Such a measure would be proportionate and appropriate since there are no less restrictive, cheaper and equally efficient alternatives (informational campaigns are futile in such a pro-drinking environment and content restrictions or partial volume bans will still lead to exposure of minors).
* European restrictions on tobacco advertising, gambling and prescription drugs show that there are possibilities for the EU to protect its citizens by adopting extensive advertising bans.
* Content restrictions and partial time bans still allow for exposure of youth to effective marketing of alcohol.

*European Commission’s perspective*

**Pieter De-Conninck**, **European commission, DG SANCO** went through a number of slides showing the evolution of EU action on this issue:

* From the Council conclusions and recommendations (2001) to the adoption of an EU Alcohol Strategy (2006-2012) and the establishment of the European Alcohol and Health Forum and a marketing taskforce.
* He also spoke about DG SANCO roundtable on advertising self-regulation and the reports produced by the forum and the science group of the Forum that acknowledges the impact of alcohol marketing on young people.
* He announced some future reports:
* Update of the 2009 Self-Regulation mapping report;
* 3 Tendered studies: “An EU-wide overview of the market and regulation regarding types of alcoholic beverages with potentially particular appeal to minors”; “Further study on the affordability of alcoholic beverages in the EU”; “An assessment of young people’s exposure to alcohol marketing in audiovisual and online media”.
* In 2012 the European Commission will publish its second progress report on the EU Alcohol strategy which will be crucial to decide on future EU action. Information sources that will be used: Independent evaluation of the implementation of the European Alcohol and Health Forum process and the cooperation with Member States, a joint EC/WHO survey addressed to Member States on 2011 trends in alcohol consumption and harm development of policies and measures; Internal reporting, including by other DGs.

**Marcel Boulogne**, **European Commission DG INFSO** added:

* Audio Visual Media Services directive (AVMS): EU regulation does not ban alcohol commercial communications unless aimed specifically at minors or encouraging immoderate consumption. Member States may have stricter rules (eg. Sweden and France).
* Specific rules for TV advertising and Teleshopping (article 22): Alcohol Advertising may not be aimed at or depict minors, allude to the betterment of physical performance, shown to people when driving, suggest social or sexual success, therapeutic qualities or a means of resolving personal conflict, promote immoderate consumption, or place emphasis on high alcoholic content as being positive attribute.
* The implementation of the directive by the Member States is monitored by an external body, on behalf of the commission. Main broadcasting channels in countries are monitored in sets of 5 countries at a time, on rotation. Until 2008 this monitoring was only about the 12 minute limit on alcohol advertising per hour on television channels. From 2009 the monitoring will concern also the qualitative provisions on advertising, including alcohol advertising. This enlarged scope gave rise to a considerable methodological work in order to develop new indicators to capture these aspects. These elements will feature in the report on the implementation of AVMS directive which is scheduled to be adopted in December 2011.

*Debate*

**Mariann Skar**, Secretary General of **Eurocare** opened the Q&A session.

A high-level representative from the **European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA)** made the following intervention:

* He appreciated the work being done, stating that there were share objectives around not targeting young people, but they did not necessarily always share the same conclusions.
* In response to the scrutiny of some of the decisions of the national SA bodies in the findings presented from the draft version of the study, he wished to know more about the procedures, methodology and scrutiny of the results. He wished to have a constructive dialogue before the final report was published.
* He did not agree with the opinion that one size fits all.
* He questioned the comments on the code on humour, saying that Belgium does include this in its regulation.
* He was prepared to learn more from new data and was willing to renew codes, and suggested that they working together towards responsible self-marketing.

**Tiziana Codenotti** clarified that she had spoken of regulations from the specific five countries looked at in the study, and so she was glad to hear that in Belgium there was reference to humour and irony in the regulation.

A member of the **Eurocare** board, as regarded draw your own bottle Malibu example, asked how many 35-50 year olds participated in the study, and asked whether senior magazines were showing this advertising. **Wim van Dalen** said that the one key issue is that when we complain about this kind of advert, the advertising committee always says that you cannot prove that adults are also not attracted by the advert. The discussion is then lost. We should not accept any alcohol advertising that appeals to youth at all.

A representative of the **Dutch Advertising Standards Authority (Stichting Reclame Code)** said that this advert was only really seen in shops where you could buy the alcohol, and children are not allowed to buy the product. She added that because of the ‘draft’ nature of these findings, they should not be presented in public yet, and added that their (SRC) point of view should be brought to some of the details.

**Marian Harkin (ALDE, IE)** on the issue of specifically targeting children and adolescents, explained that if you remove the word ‘specifically’, then we are left with ‘targeted’. There are many messages that are equally attractive to 15 year olds and to 50 year olds, like the notion of belonging (which is a human need).

A representative from the **European Cancer Leagues** showed an image of the body organs where alcohol causes cancer and emphasised that from a public health perspective alcohol advertising should just be banned.

**Katherine Brown** asked Pieter De-Conninck about the rationale behind the specific intention stated in the EU alcohol strategy not to introduce harmonised legislation, when on the tobacco front, harmonised legislation with regards to advertising has proven to be extremely successful in terms of public health.

**Marian Harkin (ALDE, IE)** added to that question. She explained that she would be attending a herbal medicine conference at that moment if she had not been in this meeting, making the point that the EU is harmonising on that topic, yet there is no move to harmonise here. **Peter De-Coninck** replied that this was an interesting question, and that the short answer was ‘politics’.

**Wim dan Dalen** reemphasised the volume aspect of advertising. He hoped that moves forward would be on volume, because content discussions are endless.

The representative of the **Dutch Advertising Standards Authority (Stichting Reclame Code)** replied that alcohol adverts in the Netherlands are banned before 9pm.  **Wim van Dalen** agreed, but stated that there was concrete data showing that a large group of young people were watching television after that time. The representative of the **Dutch Advertising Standards Authority (Stichting Reclame Code)** asked whether it was normal that 13-17 year olds are watching television at that time, to which **Wim van Dalen** replied that yes, they tend to watch it from 9-11pm. Adding that this was a good reason for a ban on such advertising.

**Cliona Murphy** concluded the session by rounding up the main conclusions. Some of these points were that:

* Every day in many ways and in many different media children and young people are exposed to positive , risk-free imaged of alcohol and its use.
* There is a lack of regulation and legislation at member state and EU level, meaning that we have chosen to poorly protect young people from these sophisticated and powerful influences.
* Marketing can shape youth culture by creating and sustaining expectations and norms about how to achieve social and sexual success, how to celebrate and how to relax or belong.
* Alcohol advertising has colonised many of the worlds in which youth spends their time (the world of music, sports and online world).
* Integrated marketing has normalised the use of alcohol
* This exposure matters because alcohol marketing influences young people to drink more and to drink sooner, drinking patterns have a direct impact on their health and general wellbeing and because young people are more vulnerable to alcohol use.
* Self regulation does not offer the needed protection. The question is whether we want to act to protect.
* Regulations need to address all elements of the marketing mix, given that when we legislate in one area this tends to lead to increased investments in other areas.
* Regulation needs to be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries and needs to be embedded in law.
* Effective legislation needs to address both content and volume.
* Where advertising is permitted young people should be formally involved in the process, they are the best people to judge what a particular message says as often they are the target audience.
* Pricing policy remains one of the most effective ways of reducing alcohol related harms and costs.
* Digital media are fast growing media for alcohol advertising. Serious consideration should be given to banning the use of marketing tools in media that are difficult to monitor or reach large numbers of young people.
* It is simpler to enforce regulations that specify what can be included in marketing communications.
* Europe-wide ban on alcohol advertising is the most effective way o reducing impact.
* Duty to protect the health of citizens lays with the elected accountable guardians of the public interest and cannot be left with the alcohol industry.

**Marian Harkin (ALDE, IE)** added that:

* No one can say that the marketing does not work.
* Alcohol marketing is influencing young people to drink more and sooner, and affects their health and wellbeing.
* There is no unanimity on what to do. Do we control content, the amount, ban it totally? If content is addressed however, it seems clear that we should state what can be included, not what cannot be included in adverts.
* The big question is whether the EU can act, should act and will act. There is a basis for this in terms of public health and economic grounds, since alcohol costs the EU economy €125 billion a year. It comes down to politics and who influences politicians. Big business, but also citizens influence politicians. She asked for this to be reflected on.

The report of the meeting was prepared by:

