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BY EMAIL ONLY

Professor Mary Horgan
Chief Medical Officer
Department of Health
Miesian Plaza
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4th July 2025

Re: Alcohol Health Labelling

Dear Mary,

I am writing to express my concern about reports that the planned introduction of alcohol health warning labels in May 2026 may be re-examined by the Government, in the context of possible US tariffs on alcohol products. I have already communicated with Mr Bernard Gloster, Chief Executive Officer, HSE.

Alcohol health warning labels are a necessary public health and healthcare measure. The labelling regulations apply only to products sold in Ireland and have nothing to do with tariffs or exports.

The health warning labels state that alcohol causes fatal cancers and liver disease and highlight the danger of any alcohol consumption during pregnancy. There is no doubt that alcohol causes all of these harmful consequences. We have clear evidence that many citizens are unaware of the risks of alcohol, especially the cancer risks. The public have a right to be made aware of these health risks, and there is research evidence that the public support the introduction of health warning labels.

These labelling regulations are part of the Public Health Alcohol Act (2018) which is internationally recognised as a world leading evidence-based legislation in a country with dangerously high per capita alcohol consumption rates. The efficacy of the Act is reflected in the 15% reduction in alcohol consumption in Ireland since the Act was introduced. Despite that, alcohol consumption remains at high and dangerous levels in Ireland. We are still consuming alcohol at a level 40% above the current HSE low risk drinking guidelines and we have the eighth highest level of binge drinking across OECD countries. Such alcohol consumption is enormously harmful, causing more than 4 deaths per day in Ireland, approximately 1000 cancers per year and at least 40,000 alcohol-related hospital discharges each year. Alcohol harms place an enormous and unsustainable burden on HSE services and capacity, including an estimated 1500 hospital beds used every day.



Alcohol is a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions such as liver cirrhosis, heart disease, alcohol related brain injury and cancer. In Ireland, most drinkers consume alcohol in a manner that is risky to their health. There are also significant health harms to others, such as injuries resulting from alcohol related crime, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and road traffic incidents.

A cost analysis of the financial burdens of alcohol harm was commissioned by the Department of Health in 2014¹, and the analysis estimated the cost of alcohol harm at approximately €2.35 billion annually, including €793m costs to the health care system and €258m costs due to alcohol-related road accidents.

The Health Research Board estimated the cost to the health system at €1.5 billion in 2012, which was 11% of all public healthcare expenditure that year.²

Given the existing pressures on the HSE, especially bed capacity, there is a compelling need to reduce demand on HSE services. Action to reduce our alcohol intake will benefit Emergency Departments, where alcohol is responsible for at least 30% of presentations, and prevent and reduce liver disease, alcohol related cancers and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, which are at exceptionally high levels in Ireland.

It is in the interests of the HSE, as the primary deliverer of healthcare in Ireland and as a trusted source of public health guidance, that the Government should not review the alcohol health warning legislation and should implement the measures in full on the current timescale.

In our efforts to improve the health of the population of Ireland, to help address the huge negative impact of alcohol on our health services and to enable people to make informed choices about their health, I am writing to support the introduction of the alcohol health warning labels without delay.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colm Henry', with a large, sweeping checkmark-like flourish at the end.

Dr Colm Henry
Chief Clinical Officer

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/19454/b1990c163eaf454f9f674355eaf4d504.pdf>

² https://www.hrb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Alcohol_in_Ireland_consumption_harm_cost_and_policy_response.pdf