

Through a glass, clearly

We can't force people to drink less but we can label drink packaging better, says Lynda Waltho

In partnership with the drinks industry, the Department of Health has just announced a new voluntary scheme for increased health labelling on alcoholic drinks. Units will be quoted per glass and per bottle.



The ONS Omnibus Survey showed that while most people are, in fact, aware of units as a measurement of consumption (86 per cent), and many are aware of the recommended daily guidelines (69 per cent), only 13 per cent keep a check of the number of units they actually drink. Interestingly, the same survey showed that 75 per cent support labelling.

The real benefit of unit labelling will be that people can keep an eye on how much they are drinking, allowing them to monitor their intake more easily. The scheme will be supported by a cross-government campaign from 2008.

The government is also encouraging the industry to include sensible drinking information, specifically for women, encouraging them to avoid alcohol if pregnant or trying to conceive. There is less agreement on this point.

The British Medical Association says the proposals don't go far enough, and that people need better information. Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of science and ethics, wants posters in nightclubs and pubs, and information in restaurant menus.

"It is not the nanny state," she says. "It is the information state. It is about informed choices."

The Food Standards Agency promotes a voluntary scheme for food labelling, the so-called 'traffic light scheme'. Each item is labelled showing a colour for fats, saturated fats, sugar and salt; red signifying high, amber medium and green low.

Most retailers have accepted the system but food manufacturers are on the whole resisting the move along with Tesco, pointing to some anomalies with the colour coding, possibly fearing that a red label will mean a sales loss. Their preferred system is based on the guideline daily amounts of items like fat that it is advisable to consume. The debate rages on.

It's clear that we can't afford a similar delaying debate on alcohol labelling. Alcohol is damaging the lives of hundreds of thousands of families throughout the UK. The government estimates that up to 1.3 million children have parents with alcohol problems. Marriages affected by alcohol are twice as likely to end in divorce. Alcohol plays a part in around a third to a quarter of known cases of child abuse.

ONS puts alcohol-related deaths at 8,386 but most professionals believe this is only the tip of the iceberg. Alcohol Concern's report, *Wasted: lives lost to alcohol*, paints a

dismal picture of the extent to which alcohol misuse damages people's lives. The report has found that:

- Alcohol misuse is related to at least 10 per cent of the chronic disease burden.
- 60 people die each day (or 22,000 a year) from alcohol-related causes.
- Alcohol is the second-most important cause of high blood pressure after obesity.
- Up to one in three young people who commit suicide are intoxicated.
- Annually, up to 5,000 cancer deaths are linked to alcohol consumption.
- Up to 7,500 babies a year are born displaying symptoms of foetal alcohol syndrome in the UK.

Government has a real opportunity to change drinking behaviours by engaging with the public about excessive drinking. Labelling is a sound start – but only a start.

Lynda Waltho is the Labour MP for Stourbridge and the Chair of the All-Party Group on Alcohol Misuse