Time for the New Zealand government to ban alcohol advertising and sponsorship in sport
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Alcohol is one of the leading causes of death and disability, with around 3.5 million deaths a year due to alcohol, and approximately 25% of all deaths in young adults attributable to alcohol worldwide.1 A significant burden is also carried by the wider society through collateral damage or harms to others resulting from individuals drinking. Around 40% of those injured in drink driving accidents in New Zealand were not the drinkers, and up to a half of all police reported offences (eg, domestic violence, assaults, vandalism) in New Zealand involve alcohol.2 There are three well-established evidence-based approaches for addressing the harms associated with excessive alcohol consumption at a population level; pricing, physical availability and restrictions in alcohol marketing (ie, alcohol advertising and sponsorship).3 The New Zealand government has not effectively implemented any of them. We focus here on the latter of the three approaches to reducing alcohol harms: greater restriction on alcohol marketing.

Stricter independent regulation of, or bans on, alcohol advertising and sponsorship is consistently identified as among the most cost effective and easily implementable means for reducing alcohol-consumption and associated harms at a population level.3 Evidence on the impact of children’s exposure to alcohol advertising and sponsorship on subsequent drinking behaviour is clear. Exposure to alcohol advertising early in life is associated with earlier initiation of drinking, and greater drinking in existing drinkers.4 It is therefore unsurprising that the New Zealand governments own Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship2 and the New Zealand Law Commission Report (Alcohol in our lives: Curbing the harm)6 both called for bans on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, particularly in sport and other cultural events.

Using sport to promote alcohol
Sport is the primary vehicle for the promotion of alcohol, with the majority of the alcohol industry’s advertising and sponsorship budgets spent in and around sport. Chambers and colleagues’7 new study provides yet more evidence to support recommendations and public calls for stricter and independent regulation or bans of alcohol advertising and sponsorship in sport. Chambers and colleagues examined the extent of alcohol advertising and sponsorship messages in a sample of sporting events televised in New Zealand. For some events they showed that alcohol branding was visible nearly 50% of the broadcast time, and in the Cricket World Cup final between New Zealand and Australia, a Victorian Bitter (VB) beer logo appeared on screen over 500 times.7 While we can only guess at the extent of New Zealand children’s exposure to these alcohol messages when watching the popular sport events (it depends on audience viewing numbers), other research suggests it is likely to be extensive.

Recent research in Australia,8 a similar sporting and drinking culture to New Zealand’s, examined the extent of alcohol advertising in sport versus non-sport TV across an entire year, along with calculating children’s exposure to alcohol advertising and sponsorship on subsequent drinking behaviour is clear. Exposure to alcohol advertising early in life is associated with earlier initiation of drinking, and greater drinking in existing drinkers.4 It is therefore unsurprising that the New Zealand governments own Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship2 and the New Zealand Law Commission Report (Alcohol in our lives: Curbing the harm)6 both called for bans on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, particularly in sport and other cultural events.
The greatest exposure of children to alcohol advertising and sponsorship, regardless of time of day, was when watching sport TV. Across a complete year of sport TV viewing, there were over 60 million potential exposures to alcohol advertising for children. When taking into account programming time for sport versus other TV genres, there were approximately four alcohol advertisements in sport TV for every one advert in non-sport TV. Although similar research has not been conducted in New Zealand, it’s reasonable to assume that New Zealand children’s exposure to alcohol advertising and sponsorship messages in sport will be similar.

The study by Chambers and colleagues is an important addition to the evidence base on alcohol advertising in sport, but there has been good evidence for some time from New Zealand and elsewhere demonstrating the link between alcohol advertising and sponsorship and more problem drinking. For example, Casswell and colleagues demonstrated longitudinally that exposure to, and liking of, alcohol advertising predicted greater consumption three years later in young New Zealanders, and direct alcohol sponsorship of New Zealand sports teams, clubs and players has been found to be associated with more hazardous drinking in those receiving sponsorship compared to those not sponsored.

Policy action is needed

A ban on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, and particularly in sport TV, should be a key policy focus for the New Zealand government. Two thorough, consultative and independent reports have recommended as much, and there is public support for greater restrictions. Around 78% of the nearly 3,000 submissions to the New Zealand Law Commission review mentioned the problem of alcohol advertising and sponsorship, with 86% of those supportive of a ban or tighter restrictions on all alcohol advertising and sponsorship. We know of no study that shows that the public would miss having alcohol advertising in sport TV, but we do know of studies showing over 75% of the public support bans or tighter restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship, and this support is even greater among parents.

Governments are fond of blaming and/or calling for changes in drinking culture and associated alcohol-related harm. However, culture is, in effect, what we see around us in the environment. By growing up in New Zealand where alcohol advertising and sponsorship is ubiquitous and paired with the surrogate national identity, sport and sporting prowess, a child will implicitly, if not explicitly, assume that consuming alcohol is part of being a good New Zealander. The New Zealand government has thus far failed to act on repeated expert recommendations that would support a change in the drinking culture, and as such, continues to support a culture where problem drinking behaviour and associated harms will be difficult to address.

With independent review panels recommending bans on alcohol advertising and sponsorship in sport, widespread public support for the same, and evidence to suggest that such initiatives are cost effective and will reduce alcohol-related harms, why has the government not acted? Are vested interests (eg, alcohol industry, advertising industry and sport administrators) preventing the adoption of effect alcohol policy making? There is an increasing evidence base on the influence of vested interest on policy making, and much of the research suggests the influence of vested interest on policy making is not in the interest of public health. Medical and public health organisations along with health advocates need to call on the New Zealand government to explain their inaction in the face of strong evidence-based calls for action.
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Nil.

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