

Point/Counterpoint: The Great Debate between Big Alcohol and Public Health

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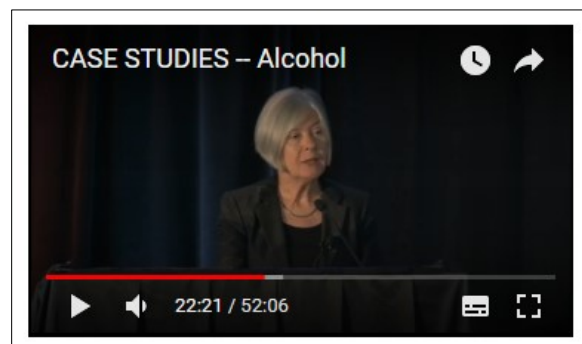
On October 2, 2018, an emerging issue with enormous implications for public health was the subject of a day-long symposium at Boston University. The theme was the relationships between academic institutions and private industries that produce products that are potentially harmful to human health.

One part of the symposium was devoted to alcohol-related health issues and whether the alcohol industry is part of the solution or part of the problem. The two presenters could not have presented more contrasting views.

On the one hand, Scott Ratzan described his career as a well-connected academic who moves effortlessly through the halls of power, including the Kennedy School at Harvard University and Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. His resume also includes extensive corporate positions, such as Vice President of Global Health at Johnson & Johnson, and Vice President of Global Corporate Affairs for AB InBev, arguably the world's largest beer producing company. Ratzan is the founding President and currently serves as Board Director of the AB InBev Foundation, an organization devoted to implementing the Global Smart Drinking Goals program, which has pledged one billion dollars to reduce harmful use of alcohol around the world.

On the other side of the industry-academia dialogue was Sally Casswell, Co-Director of the SHORE/Whariki Research Centre, College of Health, Massey University, in Auckland, New Zealand. Her resume includes a university chair in social and health research, receipt of the Jellinek Memorial Award, the premier

international award for alcohol research, current president of the Kettil Bruun Society for Social and Epidemiological Research on Alcohol and the publication of more than 200 articles in peer reviewed journals. Dr. Casswell is also the Chair of the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance (GAPA), a network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public health agencies that advocate for evidence-based alcohol policies, free from commercial interests.



[Professor Sally Casswell at the Boston University symposium on the relationships between academic institutions and private industries.](#)

Round One

Scott Ratzan opened the dialogue with a recital of his activities in areas related to industry-academic partnerships such as MomConnect in South Africa, the Global Smokefree Worksite Challenge, the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, and more recently, his work with AB InBev.

According to Ratzan, “partnerships among key stakeholders, including business, academia, government and civil society organizations will be needed to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. Ratzan invoked the Greek Myth of Sisyphus to suggest that the reduction of global alcohol problems would require

concerted action among all stakeholders to get the global alcohol problem “over the hill.”

The strategy is to “take the lessons that we’ve learned from communication and labeling, and also try to help make a difference on products around the world.” Arguing that this is something “a public health school cannot do alone,” he suggested that the alcohol industry’s “reformulation” of its product portfolio is designed to introduce “new products that switch people or change behaviors for lower alcohol products.”

Using concepts like “strategic diplomacy,” “constructive ambiguity,” and “academic integrity,” he described the Smart Drinking Goals program as a way to promote responsible drinking through “changing behavior through social norms and empowering consumers through choice.” He explained that this includes “new products that switch people or change behaviors for lower alcohol products, including zero alcohol beers.....”

These product innovations and marketing initiatives are accompanied by a pilot program of public-private partnerships that are now being implemented in six cities around the world. According to Ratzan, “...all of these pilots need to be done with the *sine qua non* of having a government partner, an NGO partner and the private sector partner...” In his closing comments, he announced that “the city pilots were instrumental in reducing (harmful alcohol consumption) 10 percent, which is the WHO goal”.

Round Two

Sally Casswell began by noting that her perspective on global developments in alcohol policy has been informed by “relationships with

the World Health Organization and also wearing my other voluntary hat of chairing the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance...”

She announced to the audience that her argument is “really very simple.The alcohol industry is reliant upon heavy drinking occasions, which means that they have to interfere with and subvert the uptake of effective alcohol policy. And their role of engagement with academia is a form of stakeholder marketing which is meant to legitimize themselves, and allow them to operate more freely in the policy environment at national and global levels.”

She described how the commercial activities of the transnational corporations are now focused on the low- and middle-income countries, in part because of market saturation and growing health consciousness in the high-income countries. The emerging markets are characterized by urbanization and growing youth populations, conditions that will allow the alcohol industry to expand there while also acting “to recruit new cohorts of heavy drinkers to replace those drinkers who die or move out of heavy drinking in the high income countries.” She suggested that this expansion into the developing world is being facilitated by sophisticated digital marketing and industry-supported trade agreements that give greater priority to industry profit than to regulations dictated by public health concerns.

Describing WHO data on alcohol’s contribution to the global burden of diseases and injuries, including alcohol as a cause of cancer, she also noted its impact on adolescent brain development and the enormous amount of harm to others in the drinker’s environment. She then asked rhetorically: “What is the

industry response to the growing awareness of the extent of harm?” Her answer was to suggest that the industry is focusing on “personal responsibility and stakeholder marketing,” both of which are key ingredients of the Global Smart Drinking Goals initiatives.

Citing evidence that industry corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives like the GSDG program are mainly marketing initiatives that are not based on science (Babor et al., 2018; [Robaina et al., 2018](#)) she noted the lack of interest by the alcohol industry in the World Health Organization’s “Best Buys,” such as “the restriction of availability, a decrease in affordability, and a banning of all alcohol promotion.”

According to Casswell, findings from the [International Alcohol Control study](#) (see Viet Cuong et al., 2018) show that heavy drinking occasions account for a substantial proportion of alcohol sold by the alcohol industry in different countries: “This underpins the reason why the industry cannot afford to let effective policy come through.”

“The bottom line is that social responsibility needs to be seen as contributing to profit.”

Questions and Answers

In the Q & A, both speakers agreed that funding mechanisms are needed for research and policies that are independent and credible, although Casswell argued that the alcohol industry should pay its fair share of taxes and

government should fund research, whereas Ratzan pointed to Global Smart Drinking Goals and AB InBev Foundation as solutions. Casswell also suggested the need for a Framework Convention on Alcohol Control, similar to the international treaty that most of the world’s countries have signed to regulate tobacco products.

Another question dealt with the growing consensus that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, which seems to contradict the “responsible drinking” message of the alcohol industry. Ratzan argued that health information literacy “is ultimately where we need to head,” whereas Casswell stated that if “every drink increases the risk of breast cancer,” the strategic ambiguity inherent in “responsible drinking” messages is basically flawed.

In response to a final question about whether “CSR is ultimately part of social marketing,” Dr. Ratzan pointed to the need for “Holistic approaches, how do we get different sectors involved and learn from what is happening on the ground...” In contrast, Prof. Casswell said CSR is useful to the alcohol industry “as long as it's contributing to that bottom line, to profit.”

**The two presentations and following Q&A session can be viewed at*

<https://youtu.be/MPENCOLqolo>

References

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FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ADDITIONAL SUPPORTING MATERIAL:

[Global Alcohol Policy Alliance](#)

[Alcohol Justice](#)

[Institute for Alcohol Studies](#)

[AB InBev Foundation](#)

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