

Why alcohol ads should be banned

 By [Bhekisisa Mncube](#)

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Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has urged society to support him in his bid to stop the advertising of alcoholic beverages. He announced that draft legislation to provide a total ban is to be presented to Parliament this month. It is indeed a brave move, but it's fraught with danger as the liquor industry is the largest contributor of advertising revenue for most media outlets. Yet, the social negative effects of alcohol use/abuse are incalculable.

Charles Parry, Nadine Harker Burnhams and Leslie London, writing in an article entitled '[Issues in public health](#)' argue that currently, about R2 billion is spent annually on alcohol marketing/advertising in South Africa, with sports sponsorships accounting for some 30%.

Glenda Nevill of The MediaShop said the [SAB alone increased its adspend from R547 million in 2010 to R816 million](#) in 2011 - a 49% increase. The total adspend for 2012 was predicted to be R33.8 billion for all industries. Are South African companies/advertisers financially extravagant fools? The answer is no.

There is a direct relationship between advertising spend and increased consumption of an advertised product or service. Advertising buys a share of the trust between the brand and target market.

Richard Pollay, author of 'The Distorted Mirror: Reflection on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising' uses a metaphor of 'brain surgery' when he speaks of the influence that advertising has on society. Pollay says there is no doubt that advertising influences our culture, which in turn influences us. Advertisements are designed to "attract attention, change attitudes, and to command our behaviour". Pollay insists that advertisers present information in a way that is easily absorbed so that we do not have to do a lot of thinking in order to take in the concept and apply it at a later time subconsciously.

Influencing young people's behaviour

Writing in the South African Medical Journal, Vol 102, No 7 (2012) researchers Parry, Harker Burnhams and London concur with Pollay. They argue that contrary to the liquor industry view that alcohol advertising only influences brand choice, studies in several countries established that alcohol advertising influences young people's behaviour; it normalises drinking in many different settings, brings about positive beliefs about drinking, and encourages young people to drink alcohol sooner and in greater quantities. A meta-analysis of 322 estimated advertising elasticities found a positive effect of advertising on consumption, says the researchers.

As a direct result of relentless advertising messages it is reckoned that South Africans consume over five billion litres of

alcohol annually; this equates to 9-10 litres of pure alcohol per person.

According to the [World Health Organisation 2011 report](#) our consumption is already among the highest per capita consumption rates in the world. Commonly, high overall consumption levels are found in countries such as the Russian Federation, which display both high beer and high spirits consumption.

A scourge in our country

The [2009 SA Government research](#) indicated that an estimated 50% of people who die on South African roads have a blood alcohol concentration level above 0.05 g per 100 millilitres, which is the maximum legal blood alcohol limit for a private motorist, for the drivers of "public" vehicles, i.e. taxis and buses the limit is 0.02 g.

The December 2012 drink driving figures alone further lends credence to this study. A total of 2174 people were arrested for driving-related offences. More than half of the arrests, 1153 people, were for drunken driving according to the preliminary results released by the Road Traffic Management Corporation (RTMC). Clearly, drunken driving is a scourge in our country.

It is within this context that the call by Motsoaledi to impose a total ban on alcohol advertising must be supported.

Motsoaledi also contends that the alcohol industry claims to contribute billions to the country's economy every year, but at the same time it causes about R39 billion worth of devastation yearly. Although available figures on total cost of alcohol related matters on the fiscus differ vastly, the Minister's figures aren't pie in the sky.

Cost to society

According to Savera Kalideen, advocacy manager at Soul City, in a November 2009 study, it provided an estimate of what government is actually spending on account of alcohol abuse rather than attempting to calculate the full cost to society of alcohol abuse.

"Our research suggests that provincial governments allocate a total of close to R7 billion on direct costs as a result of alcohol use and abuse, while national government allocates more than R10 billion. The revenue gained from value-added tax on alcohol sales and liquor licenses is estimated to be R16 billion, which means government spent R1.1 billion out of its own coffers," the study says. Whereas researchers Parry, Harker Burnhams and London estimate the cost to provincial health departments and the national Department of Health in 2009 alone to be R6.1 billion and R0.5 billion, respectively.

While the liquor producers profit substantially from their customers engaging in heavy drinking episodes, this behaviour places an enormous burden on the country. Researchers [in a 2004 study](#) found that alcohol accounted for 6.3% of DALYs lost in South Africa (i.e. years of life lost through dying prematurely) because of an alcohol-related event or living with a disability caused by alcohol. About 130 people die daily as a result of alcohol-related causes, and 46% from injuries. We clearly have a problem on our hands. It is time for extraordinary measures to deal with this situation in our country.

There is ample evidence indicating that the severe public health burden from hazardous and harmful use of alcohol in South Africa warrants the same drastic action. We have to stop the liquor industry in its tracks. Let us confiscate the industry's fishing rod to save the fish from the poisoned waters of advertising.

I vote for a total ban on alcohol advertising and zero alcohol level for drivers.

ABOUT BHEKISISA MNCUBE

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