



Editorial

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Alcohol sponsorship back in the spotlight

Over the 2014 Christmas period a group of leading UK health experts, including the president of the Royal College of Physicians and the chair of council at the British Medical Association, wrote an open letter to the *Guardian* newspaper calling for an alcohol sponsorship ban in sport. The debate on the subject has been running since tobacco sponsorship was banned in European (EU) countries in 2006.

In this edition of the *Journal* we introduce further research to the debate with a paper from Sarah Kelly et al, senior academics in Australia, who demonstrate the level of sponsorship activation among alcohol companies; in particular, they point to social media activation, which is largely unregulated and appears to break the code of practice agreed by the alcohol industry.

By and large, this paper calls for a ban on alcohol sponsorship in sport, and in Australia a significant number of major sports have agreed to a voluntary ban based on the government replacing sponsor fees with a major grant to sports bodies.

The other side of the coin is a paper published in this *Journal* in 2009 by Fiona Davies of Cardiff University, which examined the effects of both sporting involvement and alcohol sponsorship on underage drinking. Her findings were that although sponsorship appeared to have a small effect, it was very little in comparison to sports culture, the inference being that an alcohol sponsorship ban would have very little impact on consumption.

Indeed, evidence from France, where alcohol sponsorship was banned with the introduction of the Loi Envin [law] in 1991, sheds very little light on whether the bans have any effect. France was undergoing a period of steady decline in consumption before the ban and this has continued. However, since the ban was introduced, there has been a marked increase in binge drinking among young people. Some

are citing the advent of social media as a catalyst for the new problems.

French addiction specialist Professor Michel Reynaud, for example, says: "Social networks have democratised consumption of alcohol and proclaimed drunkenness as a status symbol."¹

This would clearly suggest that any alcohol sponsors (and indeed non-sponsors) need to be very cautious about how their campaigns are activated via social media.

What is of major concern, however, is the call for a ban on alcohol sponsorship without serious consideration for what appear to be the real causes of problematic drinking. Governments could invest time and resources bringing new laws onto the statute books only to find that alcohol-related problems remain. This would simply put back the point at which the real problems are addressed and many lives will be destroyed in the meantime.

Whether or not an alcohol sponsorship ban is worthwhile remains open for debate. Our sister publication, *Sponsorship Today*, recently undertook a survey which showed that globally beer companies alone spent \$1.4 billion on sport. It found no pattern between national sponsorship spend and national consumption. That is a lot of money to take out of professional sports funding, so legislators need to think long and hard about what should be the next step. In the meantime, as ever, we aim to inform the debate with continued professional research.

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1: 'Le binge-drinking' takes hold of France as alcohol-related hospital admissions rise by 30%. *Daily Mail*, 27 March 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2300082/France-sees-sharp-rise-alcohol-related-emergency-hospitalisations.html>