

Dear Sirs,

Your article by Lisa Barneto ("When does tobacco become more than just tobacco?" NZMSJ May 2010) highlights an increasing phenomenon in Anglophone jurisdictions such as New Zealand. Szasz¹ warned against the 'therapeutic tyranny' over a quarter of a century ago and John Stuart Mill² as long as one and a half centuries ago, but it seems Anglophone societies have experienced for so long the benefits of liberty that they have forgotten, unlike Germany, how zealously it must be guarded: "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance". Levin³ most eloquently illustrates this.

There is little doubt that the impact of tobacco companies adversely affects health, but this has mainly been by poor policies such as mass advertising and low tobacco taxes that do not defray the cost tobacco imposes upon society. This has been largely remedied, however, the great pity is that government lacks the resolve to extend this to alcohol, especially to restrict the control of unwarranted mass advertising.

The success of tobacco taxes and advertising restriction looks set to continue as new generations are not exposed to tendentious messages of advertising. The tobacco and alcohol industries spend fortunes on advertising because they know it promotes consumption and so they try hard to resist advertising restrictions.

It is all the more regrettable that these successes are threatened by the zeal of public health officials who, not satisfied with steady success, would start down the road of bans, ultimately leading to prohibition. The lesson of the drug prohibition should deter any clear thinker from embarking on this disastrous route but, unfortunately, emotion climbs on the band-wagon until public health policy approaches religious zeal with all its intolerant side-effects for which religion is notorious. Graham's⁴ compelling philosophical plea for tolerance is the remedy for such misfortunes but there is little sign of this learning in Barneto's article.

Yours faithfully,

John Marks FRANZCP,

Gisborne

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