

# Letters

## Should the legal age for buying alcohol be raised to 21 years?

TO THE EDITOR: Toumbourou and colleagues argue that the Australian legal age for buying alcohol should be increased.<sup>1</sup> However, they overstate their case by only citing research that supports their position, giving an impression of scientific consensus on several key issues when there is strong contrary evidence.

They consider the effects of legal access to alcohol on traffic safety. But they neglect to mention the only recent Australian evidence on this topic, which found that legal access did not increase the risk of serious motor vehicle accidents in New South Wales.<sup>2</sup> They also cite research suggesting that lowering the buying age from 20 to 18 years in New Zealand impaired traffic safety, based on an increase in accidents involving alcohol among 18–19-year-olds relative to 20–24-year-olds after the policy change.<sup>3</sup> However, a follow-up study found that the crash rate for 18–19-year-olds was rising relative to the older comparison group before the policy change was enacted, and that there was no evidence that the policy change affected traffic safety.<sup>4</sup>

They also dismiss the possibility that alcohol and illicit drugs may be substitutes for each other, ignoring recent contrary evidence.<sup>5,6</sup>

More broadly, their argument for increasing the legal age for buying alcohol is predicated on the idea that any policy change that promotes health should be undertaken, without any consideration of how the magnitude of such health benefits compares to the costs of implementing such a policy.

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- 1 Toumbourou JW, Kypri K, Jones SC, Hickie IB. Should the legal age for buying alcohol be raised to 21 years? *Med J Aust* 2014; 200: 568–570.
- 2 Lindo JM, Siminski P, Yerokhin O. Breaking the link between legal access to alcohol and motor vehicle accidents: evidence from New South Wales. NBER Working Paper No. 19857. Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2014. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19857> (accessed Aug 2014).
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- 6 Crost B, Guerrero S. The effect of alcohol availability on marijuana use: evidence from the minimum legal drinking age. *J Health Econ* 2012; 31: 112–121. □

**IN REPLY:** We disagree with the points raised by Lindo and Siminski. All systematic reviews show harm associated with lowering the purchasing age and reduction in harm from increasing it. We stand by our decision to emphasise findings published in peer-reviewed journals. They cite their non-peer-reviewed New South Wales study to claim that reaching the legal age of 18 years for purchasing alcohol did not increase serious motor vehicle accident risk. However, their comparison to novice drivers aged 17 years is flawed, as inexperienced drivers in their first year are at their highest lifetime risk of vehicle accidents. To support their criticisms of New Zealand research, they cite one non-peer-reviewed report. Our conclusions are based on two independent peer-reviewed studies, supported by additional studies,<sup>1</sup> including recent evidence of long-term negative effects of the New Zealand law change<sup>2</sup> not confined to traffic injury.<sup>3</sup>

They claim that we ignore illicit drug substitution studies showing



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that up to 2% of adolescents in the United States use cannabis and then change to alcohol at 21 years of age, when they can legally purchase it. However, these effects are inconsistent across models,<sup>4</sup> and some studies report no effect.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the epidemiological trend and cross-national comparative findings that we cite demonstrate that the US age-21 laws have been associated with robust reductions in all forms of substance use, with 69% of US adolescents being abstinent.<sup>6</sup>

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