

Under the Influence

American Medical Association and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Battle Big Alcohol

By Patrick J. Reilly

Summary: The American Medical Association does laudable work warning against the dangers of excessive drinking. But the AMA has joined with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to criticize equally laudable efforts by beer companies to advertise against excess drinking. A narrow political agenda and un-sound science is leading a once-respected scientific body astray.

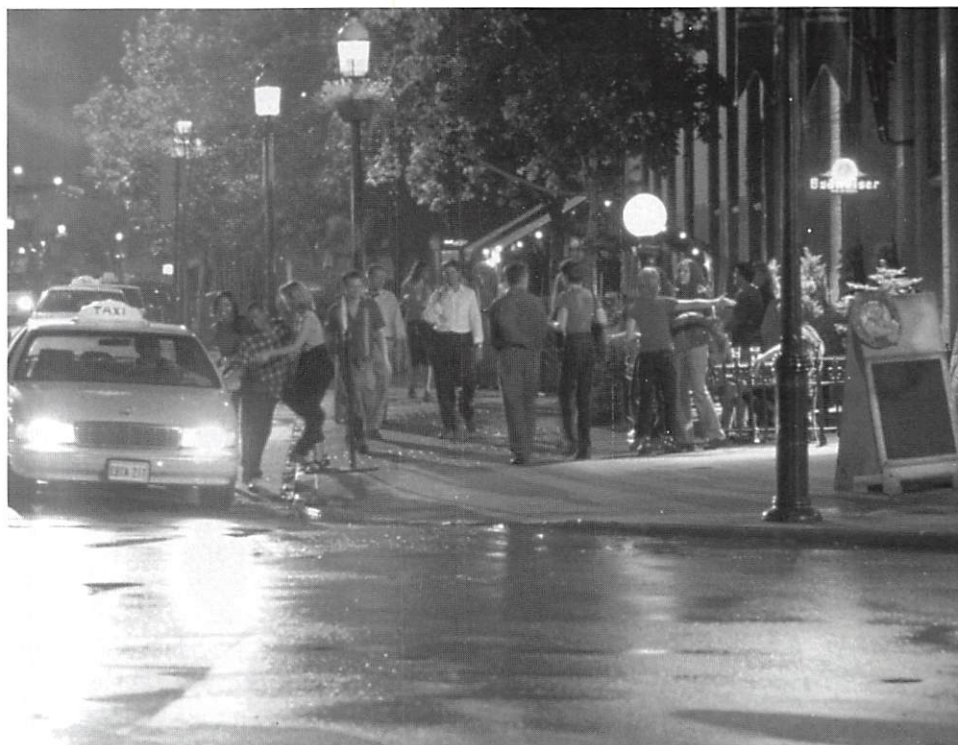
Doctor's warning: Advertisements discouraging college student binge drinking are hazardous to your health. Or so says America's leading association of physicians, the American Medical Association (AMA).

Most Americans find nothing sinister about colleges and universities sponsoring public service ads calling for responsible alcohol use. But the ads and their sponsors have attracted the ire of the AMA, which is waging a national media campaign to discredit both.

The advertisements are well-designed and their message is unambiguous. One recent television ad features costumed mascots from a dozen colleges gathered in a locker room for a coach's pep talk.

"The way you celebrate says a lot about you," the coach bellows at the assembled terrapins and tigers. "And what you do reflects on your school. So just be responsible. Respect the law. And celebrate safely. It's all about having a good head on your shoulders."

Anheuser-Busch provides most of the



Anheuser-Busch's ad campaign to encourage safe drinking through ads like the one above has drawn the ire of the AMA.

money for this particular ad campaign, which it jointly sponsors with the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). The beer company's campaign is part of a growing trend in the alcoholic beverage industry to promote responsible drinking. Producing the ads is not inexpensive—and some heavy drinkers may be annoyed—but the companies recognize significant benefits in this type of "corporate citizenship" program. Safe-drinking public service announcements inform the industry's consumers about legitimate health and safety issues. Of course, they also burnish

the company's public image and help ward off potential legal and political liabilities.

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During the 1990s, Anheuser-Busch alone spent at least \$5.4 million on safe-drinking programs. Others are just as involved. The Century Council, which represents the distilled spirits industry (i.e. hard liquor), has partnered with 37 members of Congress and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America to distribute videos on underage drinking to parents. The group also has developed a "Cops in Shops" program to reduce sales of alcohol to minors.

Hidden Message?

So what's bugging the AMA and its principal financial backer, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), America's leading health-care philanthropy?

"The unfortunate, unprecedented and misguided partnership—ostensibly to promote responsible drinking—should be terminated immediately," opined AMA in a full-page advertisement last March in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Despite acknowledging that the ad campaign is "well-intentioned," AMA complained that co-sponsorship by the land-grant colleges and state universities in association with

Anheuser-Busch "raises serious questions about the credibility of NASULGC's commitment to fighting our nation's number one campus drug problem." But a spokeswoman for the association answers, "You can't solve the problem of underage drinking without involving the beverage industry"—and acknowledges that substantial industry funding is essential to a large public service campaign.

Most amazingly, AMA accuses Big Alcohol of insidiously using safe-drinking ads to market its product to college students. That kind of reasoning is foreign to most Americans who don't share the conspiratorial and increasingly anti-corporate outlooks of the AMA and RWJF. But in recent years RWJF has been using its financial muscle to pull together coalitions of nonprofits, including leading health organizations like AMA and the American Cancer Society, to launch largely successful campaigns against what it considers social renegades like tobacco and guns. Now it's going after alcohol. The health-care elite is exploiting concern about complex public health problems like alcohol abuse to drum up support for a radical but easy-to-understand solution: Blame the industry, restrict its activities and—if possible—put it out of business.

With the deep pockets of RWJF at its disposal, AMA isn't too interested in the practical economic consequences of its advice on the beer and alcoholic beverage industry's consumers, investors and employees.

Tackling a Serious Problem

There's no dispute that many college students need to temper their drinking habits. College-age drinking contributes to many student deaths, injuries and violent assaults. A study released in April by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism estimated that drinking was involved in as many as 1,400 student deaths, 500,000 injuries and 70,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape each year.

AMA has responded with two anti-alcohol programs that are directed by its Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse, established in 1996. The programs are

funded by RWJF. Unlike other scientific and professional associations, AMA makes no attempt to claim professional independence from its benefactor. Indeed, it's difficult to determine exactly who calls the shots for the Office, which is described as part of AMA but is also a "national program office" of RWJF.

The Office's director is an AMA employee, Dr. Richard Yoast. A veteran of the anti-tobacco wars, Yoast is former director of the American Stop Smoking Intervention Study and Trial (ASSIST) in Wisconsin, a federally-funded program begun during the Clinton Administration. The AMA website also identifies RWJF employees as "key contacts" for the Office, including two senior program officers, Dr. Connie Pachura and Dr. Mary Ann Scheirer.

RWJF has committed \$10.2 million over seven years (1996-2003) to an AMA program called "Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions: Youth and Adults United for Change." The program hopes to do for alcoholic beverages what past RWJF grantees have done for tobacco and guns: build broad coalitions advocating stricter government controls. AMA is helping to set-up and coordinate 12 state-wide coalitions comprised of nonprofits, government agencies, and religious and business leaders to tackle underage drinking. (See list on page 3.) There is a public relations aspect to the program—teaching young people about the dangers of excessive drinking. But the program's primary emphasis is to push for stricter laws on drinking, increased taxes on alcohol and restrictions on advertising alcoholic beverages.

Some of the coalitions have met with success. The Missouri and Puerto Rico coalitions helped secure changes in state alcohol laws to curb underage drinking, and the Missouri coalition is fighting for increases in the state alcohol excise tax. In Washington, D.C., the coalition has forged a strong alliance among groups like the American Psychological Association, American Public Health Association, Metropolitan Washington Public Health Association and even the American Cancer Society and American Lung Association,

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not traditional foes of alcohol abuse. The Medical Society of D.C. provides in-kind lobbying activities and tracks legislation related to underage drinking in public transportation, sales and advertising.

RWJF also has committed \$8.6 million over the same seven-year period (1996-2003) to a second AMA program, "A Matter of Degree: The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students." This program also relies on coalitions: ten large universities are working in cooperation with local community leaders, nonprofits and government agencies to combat binge drinking on campus. (See list on page 5.) The participating universities enforce strict policies including holding fraternities and sororities responsible for providing beer and liquor to minors, monitoring attendance at Friday and Saturday classes, and limiting alcohol sales on campus. Community organizations strive to ensure that irresponsible drinking doesn't simply shift from campuses to surrounding communities.

Besides the use of the coalition model, both AMA programs resemble the RWJF-funded campaigns against tobacco use and gun ownership in other important ways. Each is youth-oriented: they purport to target alcohol consumption by teenagers and college students. However, each AMA program prescribes policies that cast a much wider net, suggesting that coalition members are really targeting the alcohol industry overall. Both programs rely heavily on government legislation and regulation to achieve their goals, and they put particular emphasis on severe restrictions on advertising by beverage companies. Finally, both pointedly reject attempts to promote responsible individual behavior ("Just say 'No'"). Instead, they attempt to control larger factors in the social environment that are identified as the root causes of alcohol abuse by impressionable minors.

How Much Is Too Much?

This root-cause argument inspires AMA's opposition to college partnerships with Big Alcohol. AMA criticizes colleges and the beverage industries for

REDUCING UNDERAGE DRINKING THROUGH COALITIONS

- Connecticut Coalition on Youth and Alcohol
- Georgia Alcohol Policy Partnership
- Indiana Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking
- Louisiana Alliance to Prevent Underage Drinking
- Minnesota Join Together Coalition to Reduce Underage Alcohol Use
- Missouri's Youth/Adult Alliance Against Underage Drinking
- National Capital Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking (Washington, D.C.)
- North Carolina Initiative to Reduce Underage Drinking
- Oregon Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking
- Pennsylvania Against Underage Drinking
- Puerto Rico Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking
- Texas Standing Tall, A Statewide Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking

using traditional approaches for encouraging responsible student behavior. Sometimes called "social norms marketing," the prevailing strategy is based on research that finds most college students drink moderately or abstain entirely and only a minority abuse alcohol. Social norms marketing attempts to reinforce the decisions of most young people to act responsibly, and it informs heavy drinkers that their behavior is abnormal and unhealthy.

AMA admits that "research provides some support" for the social norms approach. However, its anti-alcohol programs use a different strategy based on a very different assumption: AMA says binge drinking is common. It relies almost entirely on RWJF-funded studies at Harvard University conducted in 1993, 1997 and 2000. Those studies find that about half of Americans under age 21 engage in "hazardous drinking" – defined as five or more drinks in a row, one or more times in a two-week period.

Armed with this data, AMA is embracing an unproven and unorthodox strategy that tries to change the social environment, which it blames for encouraging and enabling student binge drinking.

"Rather than blame students for their behavior or try to persuade them to stop drinking, participants in "A Matter of Degree" are identifying the environmental factors such as alcohol advertising and marketing, institutional policies and practices, local ordinances – even social and cultural beliefs and behaviors – that converge to encourage alcohol abuse," explains AMA.

Among its favorite targets: alcohol-industry sponsorship of sporting events and concerts, the discounted sale of alcohol (e.g. two-for-one drink specials and "ladies' nights") and advertising attractive to young people.

The question of how many young people drink to excess is a research dispute that is determining the strategy for combating alcohol abuse. But it's doing much more than that. AMA believes Big Alcohol's profits depend on heavy drinking, and that a key to the industry's marketing strategy is to encourage binge drinking by young people to increase its sales. If that's the case, then colleges should not be partnering with the industry, even if they are trying to promote responsible behavior.

Organization Trends

“Hazardous drinking, defined as five drinks or more per day, accounts for more than half the alcohol industry’s market and 76 percent of the beer market,” reports AMA in its position paper titled “Partner or Foe? The Alcohol Industry, Youth Alcohol Problems and Alcohol Policy Strategies.” Because AMA believes about half of America’s young people belong to this group of hazardous drinkers, it accuses Big Alcohol of deliberately promoting its products to them by reducing prices, sponsoring social events, producing flashy advertising, and selling alcohol in convenience stores and other places frequented by the young.

For its data on the alcohol market, AMA relies on 1996 and 1999 reports from researcher Thomas Greenfield of the Alcohol Research Group in Berkeley, California. Greenfield’s reports claim one-third of all alcohol sold in the U.S. and Canada is purchased by the top 2.5 percent of drinkers, who average about 12 drinks per day. Almost two-thirds of all alcohol is sold to the top 10 percent of drinkers, who consume three or more drinks daily. If true, then Big Alcohol’s profits rely heavily on a small number of largely hazardous drinkers.

But Greenfield’s data is implausible, given the actual sales of alcohol in the U.S. and Canada. His numbers account for less than half the alcohol actually sold, notes Eric Shepard of *Alcohol Issues Insights* newsletter. If 2.5 percent of drinkers (3.1 million people) were to consume one-third of all alcohol sold (nearly 100 million drinks), they would have to consume 32 drinks daily, not 12. The problem, says Shepard, is that Greenfield relies entirely on consumer surveys and self-reporting, not careful tracking of actual behavior. And Greenfield’s objectivity is suspect: he is a vocal advocate of large tax increases on alcohol and severe restrictions on beer and liquor advertising.

Battle of the Binge

If AMA’s data on alcohol sales is questionable, how trustworthy is its claim that binge drinking is widespread? The research it cites on alcohol consumption is inconclusive and sometimes controver-

sial. AMA relies primarily on results of Harvard University’s College Alcohol Study, which is also funded by RWJF, hardly a disinterested party. The Harvard study’s validity has been questioned since it debuted in 1993, with colleges and researchers arguing that it greatly exaggerates the frequency of binge drinking on college campuses. Some argue that the five-drink definition of binge drinking is too low, favoring a six- or eight-drink threshold, while others cite many studies that find a much smaller problem.

“Other studies indicate that alcohol consumption among college students is not as great as this study would indicate,” Sheldon Steinbach, vice president of the American Council on Education told *Chronicle of Higher Education*. “Young people often tend to exaggerate the amount that they consume, in the same way they might exaggerate the amount of sex they’ve had.”

Two years ago, a national e-mail survey of students sponsored by the Association of College Unions International found that 65 percent of students defined binge drinking as consuming eight or more drinks.

And the Inter-Association Task Force on Alcohol and Other Substance Abuse Issues, a coalition of 21 higher education associations, assailed the Harvard researchers’ use of the vague term “binge drinking,” which, it said, actually causes young people to believe they are part of a broad culture of alcohol abuse, thereby encouraging them to drink more than they normally would.

In other words, not only are the Harvard study’s results unsupported by most other studies, but by promoting the view that nearly half of all teenagers engage in binge drinking, AMA may actually be part of the problem identified by advocates of social norms marketing. If binge drinking is not the norm, then efforts to encourage responsible behavior are probably the best strategy for reducing alcohol abuse. But that conclusion deprives AMA of its argument that Big Alcohol is intentionally marketing alcohol sales to young people and

college students.

Recent studies favor making a distinction between binge drinking and moderate drinking: heavy drinking endangers consumers’ health, but one drink a day for women and two drinks daily for men can actually improve health. Moderate drinking “decreases the risk or has no effect on most of the major causes of death in the U.S.” and appears to reduce the risk of heart disease by about 30 to 40 percent, concludes Dr. Eric Rimm of the Harvard School of Public Health (see www2.Potsdam.edu/alcohol-info/InTheirOwnWords).

Radical Environmentalism

Why does AMA promote an elaborate “environmental” approach to reduce underage drinking when it could join ongoing efforts to promote individual responsibility—which even encourages moderate drinking as a health benefit? Apparently AMA prefers to put legal restrictions on alcohol beverage industries to curtail their ability to market to consumers of all ages.

“Social norms programs omit [environmental] variables, leaving untouched the alcohol industry’s ability to promote and sell its products with as few restrictions as possible,” complains AMA in “Partner or Foe?” The complaint is telling. AMA believes damage to the industry is necessary to reduce binge drinking and underage drinking.

AMA offers examples of what it says are industry efforts to target teenage and college-aged consumers.

- Some alcohol products are novel, such as flaming shots, and others are sweet and fruity. AMA claims the latter products “blur the line between alcohol and soft drinks” and are intended to appeal to young people.
- Alcohol advertising in magazines, on billboards and during social events appeals to an under-21 crowd drawn to pop

culture and sporting events.

- AMA complains that alcohol is “one of the most readily available consumer products” and is often sold in convenience stores and gas stations accessible to young people.
- It finds it ominous that “alcohol is cheap and becoming cheaper,” and laments that the value of alcohol excise taxes has been eroded by inflation. AMA cites research from the New York Bureau of Economic Research that concludes that high school student drinking would have decreased by 19 percent if beer taxes had kept pace with inflation in the 1980s. It seems implausible that adding 14 cents to the cost of each bottle of beer would restrain almost one in five teenagers from drinking.

AMA finds something terribly wrong with marketing a legal product to consumers. Big Alcohol is “promoting alcohol’s glamour and attractiveness and making it readily available at low prices.” That sounds like a marketing strategy for any product, for any age group. Muting advertising and restricting sales to hard-to-reach locations at higher costs will certainly reduce the market for alcoholic beverages, but AMA has yet to offer convincing evi-

dence that such measures focus on what it claims are its primary concerns: underage and binge drinking.

AMA Targets Advertising

AMA loudly protested when NBC announced late last year that it would end a 50-year-old voluntary ban on television ads for hard liquor. Although the ads would be aimed at adult consumers, AMA rallied support with its industry-targets-youth position.

“It is obvious the network is putting its desire for profit far above the health of our nation – especially young people, who develop many of their ideas and expectations about alcohol from watching TV,” said AMA trustee J. Edward Hill. In February, AMA ran a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with the headline, “Watching NBC may be hazardous to your children’s health.”

On March 20, NBC announced it would end its brief experiment with liquor advertising.

AMA’s official policies on alcohol advertising call for radical change. It demands “a total statutory prohibition of advertising of alcoholic beverages except for inside retail or wholesale outlets.” It would eliminate alcoholic beverage advertising (including beer) from all mass transit systems and television. AMA also supports legislation to ban the sale of alcohol at gasoline retailers.

But data from the Leading National Advertisers Index, produced by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, indicates that alcohol ads do not have the effect on consumption that AMA claims. From 1974 to 2000, beer companies spent widely varying amounts on advertising, with ad dollars peaking in the 1980s at more than 2.5 times the amount spent in 1974. Surprisingly, beer consumption in the U.S. remained nearly constant throughout the period.

Keeping Good Company

AMA’s policy paper asks of the alcohol industry: “Partner or Foe?”—and it picks the latter. The clearest sign that this hostile attitude is misguided is the decision by many colleges to embrace the alcohol industry’s programs encouraging individual responsibility.

This year AMA was embarrassed by its own excesses. First, it turned out that nine of the ten colleges participating in its “A Matter of Degree” program are members of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the group AMA denounced for its partnership with Anheuser-Busch.

Then it was noticed that AMA itself once partnered with the beer industry to produce a video for physicians on alcohol abuse.

“We’ve demonstrated that we can work cooperatively,” said Beer Institute president Jeffrey Becker to *Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Weekly*. “All of a sudden that’s not good enough for community groups?” It seems to work just fine for colleges.

Regrettably, AMA’s policy agenda on alcohol abuse is currently under the influence of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which is spellbound by anti-corporate campaigns in the guise of “environmental” explanation. This means both have forsaken a partnership with the beer and liquor industries. They will battle them instead on campuses and in legislatures.

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A MATTER OF DEGREE

Ten Colleges Participating in AMA Anti-Alcohol Campaign

Florida State University (Tallahassee)
Georgia Institute of Technology (Atlanta)
Lehigh University (Bethlehem, PA)
Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge)
University of Colorado (Boulder)
University of Delaware (Newark)
University of Iowa (Iowa City)
University of Nebraska at Lincoln
University of Vermont (Burlington)
University of Wisconsin (Madison)

Briefly Noted

Mike Lux, a veteran of People for the American Way and the Clinton White House, last year established a group to help liberal activists coordinate issue advocacy. The **Progressive Donor Network** gained clout by lobbying for the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill. Lux now hopes to create a common fund for groups such as the League of Conservation Voters and National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) to pay for issue ads. Says NARAL president Kate Michelman, "We're always going to do independent work. But Mike Lux's group could help us think carefully about the issues that really are most mobilizing. We can save ourselves from duplicating efforts and coordinate where each of us is going to be." The Progressive Donor Network already has the attention of Democratic Party strategists. Senators Tom Daschle and John Edwards have attended its meetings and political consultants James Carville and Bob Shrum have signed up to provide advice.

The political action committees of **Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA)** will wage major media campaigns against pro-life candidates in 2002. Already, Planned Parenthood Votes Illinois spent between \$220,000 and \$250,000 to defeat pro-life gubernatorial candidate Jim Ryan in the March primary. But Ryan won and will face Democratic Representative Rod Blagojevich in November. Ryan spokesman Dan Curry says of Planned Parenthood: "They're basically an attack arm of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party."

The **Sierra Club** is targeting Republican candidates in key Senate races. On June 24, it outlined a plan to spend millions of dollars on political ads and voter education to help defend incumbent Democrats. The first phase is to target television ads at Republican challengers John Thune in South Dakota, Saxby Chambliss in Georgia, Greg Ganske in Iowa and John Sununu in New Hampshire. Sierra also has targeted Republican incumbents Wayne Allard in Colorado and Gordon Smith in Oregon. Sierra Club political director Margaret Conway says: "We want to show who is protecting the environment." But says Dan Allen of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, "A lot of these groups are very much out of step with the states they're running ads in." Allen notes that many Sierra Club ads run in states where Democratic candidates are weak.

An April 13 benefit concert, organized by rock star Sting and "billed as the biggest environmental fundraising event in the world," generated \$1.6 million for the **Rainforest Foundation**. Only \$57,000 actually went to the foundation. But charity watchdog groups say the Rainforest Foundation seems to give significantly little money to environmental causes. Charities are supposed to donate at least 60 percent of their revenues to their causes. But the Rainforest Foundation's filing with the New York State Attorney General's office shows it gave a mere 22 percent of its revenues to environmental issues in 1999.

Utendahl Capital Partners, a struggling African-American investment bank with ties to Jesse Jackson, received a multi-million dollar bailout from **Merrill Lynch** under pressure from Jackson, according to several industry sources. Utendahl's 2001 financial report shows that the company had a cumulative deficit of \$6.8 million and that Merrill Lynch forgave \$2.45 million of debt. In addition, \$12.9 million owed to Merrill Lynch was transferred from Utendahl to an affiliate. The firm is one of Jackson's financial contributors and has had a long association with him. Jackson also has pressured corporations such as **PepsiCo Inc.** to do business with Utendahl.