

EDITOR'S CHOICE



Beverage Marketing as a Public Health Policy Target

While attending the World Congress of Public Health in Kolkata, India, last February, I made a side trip to a rural area to learn about women's empowerment initiatives. I met inspiring women and girls who were fighting for education, personal safety, and well-being in very challenging circumstances. Challenges associated with excessive alcohol intake among men in the community came up several times. But I doubt that these women and girls were aware that empowerment projects such as theirs might attract attention from Diageo, the world's largest marketer of alcoholic beverages, which is seeking new markets within India. This foretells potential alcohol-related challenges for the women themselves.

In this issue of the *Journal*, Esser and Jernigan (pages 2220–2227) describe intensive and comprehensive efforts by Diageo to take maximum advantage of marketing opportunities in India. They describe Diageo's Indian investments and elaborate marketing strategies and data showing the concurrent marked increases in alcohol consumption. They describe how the marketing practices interweave with the company's "social responsibility" initiatives, which include, ironically, investments in women's empowerment programs like the one I visited.

Three other articles in this issue focus on issues related to nonalcoholic beverages. Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are heavily promoted and widely consumed but have no nutritional value other than calories. In the context of the obesity epidemic, SSBs have become prime targets for policies to decrease consumption. However, these policy efforts are heavily opposed by multinational beverage companies, who are trying to grow existing markets and find new ones by using marketing strategies similar to those used for alcohol as well as tobacco.

Donaldson et al. (pages 2202–2209) report on their analysis of media reports about New York City's (NYC's) unsuccessful attempt to cap portion sizes of SSBs sold in restaurants and other food service settings. They describe how the volume and nature of arguments for and against the policy changed at different stages of the process in which the policy was proposed, passed but never implemented, and ultimately overturned after a lawsuit. They suggest ways to render anti-SSB policy arguments made through media channels more effective in future debates of this type. On this same issue, Roberto

and Pomeranz (pages 2183–2190) report results of their content analysis of public testimony during court proceedings that followed the lawsuit. They include a convincing set of legal approaches to refuting the main anti-SSB policy arguments.

In contrast to the NYC portion size cap, which was a plausible but unproven strategy, SSB taxation to raise prices and decrease consumption has a sound basis in economic theory and public policy precedents. The first successful US taxation policy was adopted in Berkeley, California, in November 2014. Falbe et al. (pages 2194–2201) report preliminary results of a timely and carefully designed quasi-experiment to test the fundamental assumption that the tax selectively raises shelf prices of the beverages targeted. Their study illustrates the complexities of understanding whether and how this seemingly straightforward policy lever will work (e.g., whether market dynamics will influence implementation in ways that will support rather than dilute the intended effect). Of interest, the Navajo Nation located within Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, imposed an extra two-cent sales tax on SSBs as well as a tax on snack foods, effective April 1, 2015 (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2015/04/01/396607690/navajos-fight-their-food-desert-with-junk-food-and-soda-taxes>).

The four articles cited here provide complementary perspectives and lessons about aspects of what, in the bigger picture, is essentially the same issue—how to achieve public health successes in the context of seemingly unstoppable forces that drive promotion of products that are harmful to health by multinational, multibillion dollar corporations. Whether for the benefit of people in emerging economies like India or in US cities like NYC or Berkeley, we must deconstruct these complex scenarios to identify policy levers, and then see them through to passage and implementation. These four articles provide important insights about how this can be done better. ■

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