

The Honourable Greg Sorbara
Minister of Finance
Frost Bldg South, 7th Floor
7 Queen's Park Crescent
Toronto, ON M7A 1Y7

Dear Minister:

I wish to applaud you for your response to the Beverage Alcohol System Review Panel's recommendation to auction off the wholesale and retail alcohol distribution system in Ontario. By doing so, you have maintained the public's best interest and safety as the highest priority.

At the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), we are concerned that increasing alcohol availability, through additional outlets and reductions in price, will act to increase alcohol consumption and the alcohol-related damage that inevitably follows. CAMH is an organization with a provincial mandate to conduct research, engage in public education and to participate in the development of healthy public policy in the area of addictions and mental health. While we believe that consumer access, commercial interests, government responsibility and public health and safety are all important considerations when examining Ontario's beverage alcohol system, we also know that:

- Alcohol is a factor in over 60 disabilities and diseases, and in Ontario alcohol is the third leading contributor to the burden of illness and disease.
- Scientific evidence is clear that controlling alcohol availability, through pricing, number of outlets and a public monopoly are some of the most effective ways to prevent and minimize harm related to alcohol
- Increased alcohol consumption increases problems – for example, a 1-litre increase in alcohol consumption per adult in Ontario resulted in an 8-14% increase in the drinking driver fatality rate over the same period.

Based on the clear scientific evidence, CAMH made the following recommendations in its submission to the Beverage Alcohol System Review Panel, that:

- The government maintain and strengthen the monopoly control system as a means of preventing and reducing alcohol-related problems and avoid the negative impact of piecemeal erosion of alcohol control.
- Before any proposed changes in retailing are approved for implementation, a thorough social and economic impact study be conducted with balanced representation from both the public health and commercial sectors to consider potential impact of any changes on drinking rates, patterns of use and acute or chronic harm related to alcohol.

- Any proposed changes be accompanied by a thorough and systematic evaluation plan, which goes beyond anecdotal information and includes disclosure of the findings in a timely fashion.

Additionally, CAMH, the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and other public health organizations submitted a joint response to the panel. The joint response reiterated CAMH's recommendation that Ontario retain intact its monopoly control system. It also recommended that provincial alcohol taxes be increased by 10-20% in the short term to improve public health and safety and to increase government revenues derived from alcohol.

The Panel undertook a very complex and challenging task. Although we were pleased to see that the panel recognized the need for a high level of social responsibility in the retailing of alcohol and their emphasis on adequate enforcement, as well as controlling price and number of outlets, we were disheartened to see their recommendation to auction off the wholesale and retail alcohol distribution system in Ontario. As noted above, implementing such a recommendation would have dire consequences and significantly increase costs related to managing social and health problems associated with increased alcohol consumption. The wisdom of your decision is apparent to those familiar with the basic principals of promoting health and the prevention of alcohol-related death, disability, crime, and other social problems and is strongly supported by our organization.

As part of our commitment, CAMH has been asked under the auspices of Canada's Drug Strategy to take the lead in Ontario for coordinating a partnership between the health, education and enforcement sectors with a view to developing a comprehensive alcohol and drug strategy for the province. Alcohol policy is a significant component of any effective strategy and your recent actions are clearly supportive of the directions we feel the provincial strategy needs to take. It is imperative that each provincial government contribute to these efforts and we would like to discuss Ontario's involvement more specifically with you.

We look forward to working with your Ministry and the Ontario government as it continues to look for more effective ways to reduce drinking-related harms and social problems and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the above further.

Yours sincerely,

Paul E. Garfinkel, MD, FRCP (C)
President and CEO

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