

## Who runs alcohol policy in Brazil?

Until the last few years alcohol was not regarded widely as a serious public health issue in Brazil. As a result the country did not have an active public health policy on alcohol. This has changed, partly because of the work of the Brazilian Association for the Study of Alcohol and Other Drugs (ABEAD), and also because of a constructive working relationship between ABEAD and the government department responsible for alcohol policy, the National Anti-Drugs Secretariat (SENAD). Unfortunately, however, a series of events in 2004 changed this relationship markedly and we are now seriously concerned about the direction of government policy and the influence of the alcohol industry. To explain our concern we will sketch a brief history of what has happened in Brazil since 2003.

In 2003 AmBev (the biggest beer company in Brazil with 70% of the market, and since its merger with InterBrew the second biggest in the world) approached some key figures in the alcohol field in Brazil, including several past presidents of ABEAD, asking to talk to them. Most declined. One, however, from the University of Sao Paulo, accepted and subsequently started an AmBev-funded website, the Centre for Information on Alcohol (<http://www.cisa.org.br>), whose main purpose was 'to generate a source of information on health and alcohol'. We found this industry-funded website a disturbing development, as we believe strongly that there is a direct conflict of interest here. An 'alcohol education project' cannot be funded by an industry which has, in the past, shown scant regard for scientifically based public health policies on alcohol, and used aggressive tactics to undermine them.

As a result of this development, ABEAD adopted a policy stating that it will not work with the alcohol industry or with funding from it. We realize there may not be unanimity on this stance in all countries, but here in Brazil it is essential to set clear boundaries between public health interests and those of such a powerful and wealthy industry, which operates here with a free rein.

During 2004 SENAD held public forums throughout Brazil to seek feedback on the government's alcohol and drugs policies. The then ABEAD president, Dr Ana Cecilia Marques, participated in many of these forums on behalf of ABEAD; so did a psychologist who was scientific consultant to the AmBev-funded website. We regret the fact that at these forums there was no discussion of the relationship between government and the alcohol industry, and whether they could or should work together. Therefore, in September 2004 nine health organizations, including ABEAD and the

Brazilian Psychiatric Association, wrote to SENAD asking for clarification of its relation to the alcohol industry and its attitude towards working with it. SENAD's February 2005 answer was dismissive. In essence, SENAD said that as an organ of state it can form professional relationships with anyone it wants, without hindrance. The letter did not acknowledge or address ABEAD's concerns in relation to the alcohol industry, nor indeed recognize that ethical concerns were of any relevance to public health policy on alcohol. Further, in a meeting with the National Anti-Drugs Secretary, the ABEAD president, Dr Marques, was criticized for interfering in matters which SENAD considered to be beyond her remit.

While this was happening SENAD took steps to engage the consultant to the AmBev-funded website, CISA, to manage its alcohol website and information policy. In the same month SENAD published a 40-page booklet for distribution to schools, to educate young people about alcohol and its 'responsible' use. Both the industry-funded website and this booklet give us great concern over the direction in which public health policy on alcohol is going in Brazil. One initiative is funded directly by the industry, the second by the government; yet there is no evidence base for such 'educational' initiatives [1] and both appear to us to over-emphasize positive aspects of alcohol. This, for example, is the opening paragraph of the booklet:

Beer, wine, caiprinha: elements of daily life for many people. These drinks help celebrate festive occasions, set the seal on deals, complete weekend meals, brighten up parties, 'create a climate'. They are the excuse for meeting friends in a bar, after the cinema, or even just to talk.

In fact the booklet, which appears to be aimed at young people to educate them 'how to drink responsibly', has fallen foul of Brazilian law, because it fails to mention that the law forbids the sale of alcohol to people under the age of 18. Such a statement is a legal requirement in Brazil for any such educational material. A Federal Procurator (a kind of ombudsman) forced the government to withdraw the booklet pending an enquiry.

Shortly after the government was forced to withdraw the booklet, the ABEAD president was summoned to the office of her academic departmental chair and, with no advance warning, was given 15 days notice to leave her job, in which she had been for over 12 years (receiving a performance bonus for the last few years). We believe that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Dr

1 Marques' dismissal was linked to her advocacy both of  
 2 ABEAD's views and her ethical and conflict of interest  
 3 concerns. SENAD's rejection of ABEAD's legitimate concerns  
 4 about the alcohol industry gives us grave concern  
 5 for the future of public health policy on alcohol in  
 6 Brazil.

7 These are serious issues, and we believe *Addiction*  
 8 readers will be concerned about the influence of the  
 9 alcohol industry in Brazil. It is imperative that health  
 10 professionals work together to block alcohol industry  
 11 attempts to dictate public health policy, and it is crucial  
 12 that in Brazil the government is made aware of the  
 13 dangers of allowing the alcohol industry unfettered  
 14 influence on public health policy on alcohol.

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#### 23 Reference

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 25 *Commodity. Research and Public Policy.* Oxford: Oxford Univer-  
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