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**Consumer Safety - Wine Labels**

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# The New York Times

EDITORIALS/LETTERS MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1997

## What's in a Wine Label?

The wine industry wants to put labels on its products telling consumers where to get information about their possible health benefits. It is an effort to capitalize on some studies showing that drinking moderate amounts of wine may reduce the risk of heart disease. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which is considering the request, needs to make sure that any such messages are not dangerously deceptive.

The label being proposed does not list any specific health benefits of wine. Instead it says, "To learn the health effects of moderate wine consumption send for the Federal Government's dietary guidelines." Another label, proposed by one winery, encourages consumers "to consult your family doctor about the health effects of wine enjoyment."

Opponents, including the American Medical Association and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, worry that the labels are misleading in that they seem to make a positive health claim and may encourage people to drink more. They see the labeling effort merely as an attempt to give winemakers a boost in the alcoholic beverages market.

There is certainly a danger of mixed messages. Wine bottles already carry Government warnings about the dangers of alcohol consumption for pregnant women and drivers. Additional labels that indirectly tout the benefits of wine may undermine those warnings or may be read, wrongly, as an endorsement of wine drinking by the Government.

The Government guidelines do suggest that moderate drinking may lower the risk of heart disease in some individuals. But they also warn against excessive drinking. The guidelines discuss alcohol consumption in general and do not make distinctions among wine, beer and distilled spirits.

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Trade Commission have offered to help the bureau survey consumer understanding of the proposed labels, including the willingness of customers either to write for the guidelines or to consult their doctors. Bureau officials have suggested that such a survey might be unnecessary, but the agency surely needs to understand how the public will react on a public health issue with such potential for confusion.

consumer safety - wine labelling

Elizabeth -  
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**Subject:** wine health claims

**Comments:**

AMA letter to Secretary Rubin -

per George Hacker

# American Medical Association

Physicians dedicated to the health of America



Percy Woodson, MD  
President

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August 5, 1997

The Honorable Robert E. Rubin, Secretary  
Department of the Treasury  
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Rubin:

I wish to express the American Medical Association's opposition to proposed changes by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the wording and placement of beneficial health claims for alcoholic beverages on product container labels. It is our concern that such claims would be misleading and, for many persons, inaccurate. The Wine Institute has proposed wording options that are biased in favor of product consumption and present potentially harmful messages to consumers. The labeling options are: "To learn the health effects of moderate wine consumption send for the federal government's dietary guidelines" or, "The proud people who make this wine encourage you to consult your family doctor about the health effects of wine enjoyment."

In each message, the wording fails to mention that both physicians and the dietary guidelines warn of the potential dangers many individuals face from moderate drinking. Children and adolescents, recovering alcoholics, women who are trying to conceive or who are pregnant, individuals with various illnesses or who are taking certain medications are at particular risk. Furthermore, while some research indicates that moderate drinking is associated with a decreased risk for some diseases, other research shows that such risks actually increase for certain people.

Before any changes are made in health effects labeling of alcoholic beverages, they must first be scientifically studied and evaluated for potentially negative individual and public health consequences. The proposed messages have not been tested against such rigorous standards. In fact, the health dangers presented by alcohol use indicate that labels need to contain more specific health warnings. For example, labels should clearly state that alcohol is a potentially addicting product and note the negative health conditions associated with its use. Such labeling also should contain explicit warnings about the need to limit one's use of alcohol.

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The Honorable Robert E. Rubin, Secretary  
Department of the Treasury  
August 5, 1997  
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We support the concept that all people who are considering drinking alcohol or who are concerned about the potential health effects of drinking be encouraged to consult with their physicians. Equally important is the need to communicate that any consumption of alcohol, if not medically, legally or situationally contraindicated, should be moderate and very limited as the federal dietary guidelines clearly indicate.

Thank you for your consideration of this important public health issue.

Sincerely,

*Percy Wootton, M.D.*  
Percy Wootton, M.D.  
President

cc: Mr. John W. Magaw, Director  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms  
Department of the Treasury  
650 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20226

Mr. Lawrence H. Summers  
Deputy Secretary  
Department of the Treasury  
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Room 3326  
Washington, DC 20226

# Coalition for the Prevention of Alcohol Problems

Consumer safety -  
wine labels

1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 300  
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Elizabeth  
FYI.  
Elena

August 6, 1997

Secretary Robert Rubin  
Department of the Treasury  
1500 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Secretary Rubin:

The organizations listed below strongly urge you to withhold approval of a petition by wine manufacturers to include a health statement on wine bottle labels. Research must be conducted to determine what effects this action would have on consumers.

The wine industry has only one purpose in mind: to sell more wine. The labels for which approval has been requested selectively take the words "health" and "moderate wine consumption" out of context from the U.S. Dietary Guidelines and thus present a misleading view of the overall message communicated by the Guidelines. It will also subvert the effectiveness of the message on all alcoholic beverage containers that is mandated by the federal government.

The risks and benefits of alcohol consumption vary greatly from person to person. Anyone who does not take the time and effort to request a copy of the Dietary Guidelines or consult with their physician could be misled by the proposed label and assume that "moderate" consumption (which is not defined) is good for their health. As you know, "moderate" consumption is not good for the health of alcoholics and others who suffer from alcohol-related problems, or the others who fall into the additional categories of people who should not drink under any circumstances, including pregnant women.

The Public Health Service, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the Federal Trade Commission also either oppose or have serious reservations about the proposed label language. The American Medical Association, at its June meeting, approved a resolution opposing beneficial health claims labeling. We hope that BATF will heed to the concerns of

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Co-Chairs: *George Hacker, Center for Science in the Public Interest, (202) 332-9110, ext. 343*  
*Sarah Kayson, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, (202) 737-3122*

Steering Committee: *Susan Hildebrandt, American Academy of Family Physicians, (202) 232-9033*  
*Elaine Holland, American Academy of Pediatrics, (202) 347-8600 • Barbara Levine, American Public Health Association, (202) 789-5648*  
*Bill McColl, National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors, (703) 741-7686 • Maribeth Oakes, National PTA, (202) 289-6790*  
*Jerald Scott, United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society, (202) 488-5600 • Kathy McGinley, The ARC, (202) 785-3388*  
*William C. Dodson, Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, (202) 547-8105*  
*Kathleen Sheehan, National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, (202) 783-6868*

*Coalition for the Prevention of Alcohol Problems*

Letter to Secretary Rubin

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these health and consumer professionals before taking any action on the labeling of a product that contributes to serious health and safety problems in the United States.

Please do not allow the public to be misled about the health effects of alcohol.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Alcohol Research Information Service*

*American Council on Alcohol Problems*

*American Society on Addiction Medicine*

*The ARC*

*Center for Science in the Public Interest*

*Consumer Federation of America*

*General Board of Church and Society*

*International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependence*

*Latino Council on Alcohol and Tobacco*

*Manocheian Foundation*

*Maryland Underage Drinking Prevention Coalition*

*National Citizens Communications Lobby*

*National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence*

*National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome*

*National Woman's Christian Temperance Union*

*The Palavra Tree, Inc.*

*PRIDE of St. Tammany*

*Public Citizen*

*Scott Newman Center*

*Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission*

*University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute*