

University students can't spot low-alcohol beer in taste test

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Almost half of a group of male University of Victoria students who took a taste test of their favourite frothy friend couldn't tell the difference between low- and regular-strength beer, a study released yesterday shows.

The findings by the UVic -based Centre for Addictions Research B.C. will be used by researchers and health experts next week to appeal to the B.C. government to tie liquor prices to alcohol content.

The idea behind the sin-tax policy is that if low-alcohol beverages were cheaper and high-alcohol drinks more expensive -- thus resulting in a neutral impact on provincial coffers -- consumer tastes would change toward less potent beverages.

"We are very optimistic," said Tim Stockwell, the centre's director and co-leader of the study. "There's a huge potential here we are not realizing. They can do it at a stroke of the pen with no cost ... and it will reduce death and injury and illness."

Finance Minister Carole Taylor said the tax proposal is one of thousands of recommendations she is reviewing for the upcoming budget, and said it was being considered. However, she noted that while it seems logical from a community or health perspective, it would be "extremely complicated" to write into tax legislation policy. She compared the logistics to taxing junk food based on its sugar or fat content.

Provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall said that while alcohol can be harmless for most people -- and even brings cardiac benefits to some -- it is also a habit-forming depressant and carcinogen that leads to a host of health and societal problems.

Alcohol is second only to caffeine as the most popular legal drug of choice -- enjoyed by 80 per cent of B.C. residents 15 and older, Kendall said.

The beer study was conducted by the addictions centre between August and October 2006 in pub-style sessions with unmarked glasses of beer. It compared Spinnakers Doc Hadfield ale, which has 3.8 per cent alcohol, and Kokanee Gold, which has 5.3 per cent.

The 34 volunteer participants each attended two sessions. At each session, half of the participants had the regular beer and half had the lesser-strength beer.

Although there was a preference for the taste of the 5.3 per cent beer, 45 per cent couldn't tell the difference between the two, and 66 per cent were as happy drinking the low-alcohol beer as the high-alcohol beer. About half reported no differences in their perceived intoxication.

Stockwell said the Australian government began linking liquor taxes to a beverage's alcohol content in the 1980s. Now there are more than 38 varieties of low-alcohol beer on the market comprising 30 per cent of beer sales -- whereas in B.C., beers with less than four per cent alcohol occupy only 0.2 per cent of the market, Stockwell said.

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Graduate student David Segal does a taste test between between low- and regular-strength beer.

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