Big stoush over a glass or four

Cathy O’Leary
Medical Editor

So the gloves are finally off and the battle of the booze is officially on. Under fire is one of Australia’s greatest loves, alcohol, and it is heating up quicker than a flaming liqueur.

The million-dollar question is whether we are drinking too much of the stuff and, more importantly, if we are prepared to cut back.

We’ve been inching towards crunch time for a while but no one has wanted to be the killjoy to spoil our long-held belief that a bit of alcohol is like a health tonic.

But last week the Cancer Council of WA made the unpopular move to tell drinkers a few home truths about alcohol increasing the risk of cancer. Since then the punches have been thrown from all directions.

Earlier this week, Australian Hotels Association boss Bradley Woods took a shot at the new alcohol campaign, describing it as a waste of public money. He was probably echoing the sentiments of many seasoned drinkers.

He argued it was wrong to campaign against alcohol on the grounds it was a class one carcinogen like tobacco or asbestos because even wood dust fell into the same category.

Mr Woods questioned whether it would be reasonable to have a shock campaign urging people not to expose themselves to wood dust.

This would be a fair enough argument if at least half the community was at risk from wood dust, or every Monday morning we picked up the newspaper to learn of the weekend antics of people who behaved like idiots because they were under the influence of tiny wood particles.

Still, many drinkers would have raised their glasses to his sentiments.

This week a national financial newspaper also had a crack, this time at anti-alcohol-abuse campaigner Mike Daube, describing him as Australia’s “wowser-in-chief” because he helped shape national guidelines recommending people have no more than two drinks a day.

He was even accused of being a booze snob because of his soft spot for fine malt whisky.

Not to be deterred, in a journal published today, Professor Daube has had a swing at sections of the alcohol industry that target young drinkers, describing them as having the same “pariah” status as tobacco companies.

So how did it come to this, given we have been drinking for years largely without comment or caution?
Sure, there have been concerns about problem drinkers but the bulk of people do not consider themselves in this category.

There is no doubt the campaign launched by the Cancer Council last week, which has State Government backing, is a risky one.

For years health experts have sought to distance alcohol from tobacco, with the argument that smoking is a no-brainer because it is bad for your lungs and just about every other organ, in any amount and in any form.

Alcohol, we have always been told, is different. A little bit is OK. Or so we thought.

Last week the message was loud and clear that any amount of alcohol increases the risk of cancer and it affects every part of the body. A graphic television advertisement even showed it swishing all through the body causing havoc.

All of a sudden it sounded a lot like tobacco.

So in the one corner we have health experts who have been warning the downside of alcohol but have been cautious about raising the red flag, because do it too often and they risk alienating the wider public.

In the other corner we have the powerful alcohol industry, which has a lot to lose if people actually take the advice to cut back on their drinking.

Across a big drinking population a bit of sobriety would cause a serious dent in sales from everything from cut-price beer to high-end bottles of red.

And caught in the middle are drinkers.

Many people who regard themselves as reasonably healthy have more than two drinks a day at least a few times a week.

They are not lying drunk in the streets at the weekend and they do not turn into aggressive partner-beaters at home. They grab a cab rather than risk drink-driving.

They genuinely enjoy a drink. It relaxes them and helps them unwind with friends.

If they decided not to drink more than two drinks on any one day, would they be happier in the knowledge they might reduce their risk of cancer or would it just take away a pleasure in life?

Some people will certainly shrug off the new advice as over-the-top but others may decide it’s not a bad idea to cut back a little.

Although the advice about the cancer risk might not be a game-changer, it might be an added incentive to avoid that morning-after sluggish feeling that comes from having a few too many.

Meanwhile, a new blogging website called Drink Tank invites health experts, community leaders and entrepreneurs to offer their views about alcohol use — the good, the bad and ugly.

Bloggers are also asked to nominate their favourite drink from the bar and at last check whisky and French champagne were among the drinks of choice.

Set up by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, it may provide some welcome middle ground in a debate that is far from over.

At stake in one corner is the credibility of health experts, who will have to see if people are willing to take on board the less-is-better doctrine.

But as much at risk are the millions of dollars in sales for the alcohol industry whose principal motivation is to get people to buy more.

cathy.oleary@wanews.com.au