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## **An Inconvenient Truth... Alcohol is a Drug**

What will a yearly cost of \$3.3 billion in health care and our local supermarkets soon have in common? The answer is "Alcohol".

We have been hearing a lot lately about the government's plan to modernize the selling of beer in Ontario. Premier Wynne has told us that "Ontarians have asked for convenience and now they will get it." Living in Peterborough, I have never perceived it as being inconvenient. Most Ontarians already live within a five to ten-minute drive of an LCBO or Beer Store. Even when driving up to our cottage near Apsley, beer or wine appears to be as accessible as ice-cream cones.

The move to liberalize access to alcohol seeks to create jobs and aid Ontario's economy. It seems to be an attractive situation for Ontario's brewing industry and the licenced establishments seeking to buy their products at a lower price. This may mean more choice and convenience for Ontarians who choose to drink. But with increased access comes increased consumption. With increased consumption comes increased societal costs from enforcement, health care and lost productivity. After expanding access to liquor outlets, British Columbians saw more alcohol-related deaths and Albertans saw significantly higher levels of violent death and suicide. The costs for alcohol-related harm in Peterborough City and County alone are estimated at \$51.4 million, based on a 2011 Health Unit report. We can expect these costs to rise with alcohol stocking supermarket shelves.

I find it disappointing that this evidence is being ignored in the conversation.

Alcohol alters how we think, act and feel and is toxic to many cells and organs in our bodies. It is associated with more than 200 diseases, including various cancers, mental illness, addiction, heart and liver diseases, and birth defects. It is the source of many injuries and deaths due to accidents, impaired driving, violence and suicide. Heavy drinkers knock an average of seven years off their life expectancy.

The inconvenient truth is that alcohol is a drug and deserves to be treated with respect, no matter whether it is being sold as beer, wine or liquor. We need to also consider how increased availability of alcohol further normalizes its use in our society, particularly among the younger generations. Tobacco was eventually placed out of sight to discourage teens from taking up smoking. What are we telling our children by having alcohol so readily available?

For these reasons, public health promotes a culture of moderation guided by socially responsible decisions and policies. Evidence shows that making alcohol more available than it already is in Ontario will bring a range of problems that impact everyone, not just those who choose to drink. Establishing and maintaining effective alcohol policies regarding the availability of alcohol is vital. The research clearly tells us that controls over the availability of alcohol is one of the most effective ways to limit the associated harms and costs, along with regulating pricing, taxation and limits to marketing. These strategies have helped us reduce the harm of tobacco, which also was once socially acceptable and widely available. Tobacco may still be the leading cause of death and disease in our society, but alcohol is second.

I know that in today's economy the promise of more jobs in an Ontario brewing industry is very attractive. I'd love to see more locally grown foods in supermarkets and convenience stores. Wine and beer is another story and one that does not always have a happy ending.

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