

Concerns that ban on alcohol ads may curtail freedoms

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IF THE government bans alcohol advertising, could adverts for sweets be next?

So argued one participant in a discussion this week between the Soul City Institute and the South African National Editors' Forum.

The two groups met at the Westcliff Hotel in Joburg to debate controversial new alcohol legislation, which includes a possible ban on marketing alcoholic drinks.

Nic Dawes, of the Mail & Guardian, questioned the legality of the proposed law, pointing out that advertising was a form of expression protected by the constitution.

"We're not saying that we want to curtail any freedoms under the constitution," countered Savera Kalideen, advocacy manager for Soul City.

"We're saying that there needs to be an intervention made on behalf of public health. We also have a constitutional right to have our health protected."

After hearing editors' concerns, the Soul City representatives distanced themselves from recent government lan-

guage surrounding the proposed legislation.

"It sounds very draconian to use a word like 'ban'," Kalideen said.

"But notwithstanding that, I think that when we look at the French example (Loi Evin), they're calling it a ban, but what they're actually doing is severely curtailing the way advertising happens."

Such "curtailing" could include time and space limitations on adverts.

South African officials have taken a critical look at alcohol policy in recent months. On top of advertising restrictions, the government proposed, at an anti-substance abuse summit last month, changing the legal drinking age from 18 to 21.

The Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use responded to that summit by cautioning: "Some of those recommendations will not only be ineffective in reducing alcohol-related harm, but will have unintended negative consequences".

"Do you then say all these industries are allowed to exist, but they can't advertise?" asked one participant. "How far do you go?"