Coroner Wants Health Warnings on Soft Drinks

NICK PERRY,Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A New Zealand food industry association on Wednesday rejected a coroner's call to add health warnings to soft-drink labels following the 2010 death of a woman who drank about 2 gallons of Coca-Cola a day.

Coroner David Crerar issued a final report Tuesday into the death of 31-year-old Natasha Harris, concluding that the mother of eight died from a heart attack. He said the large amount of Coca-Cola she drank likely led to metabolic imbalances that gave rise to her heart problems, adding that Coke was likely a "substantial factor" in her death.

But New Zealand Food & Grocery Council Chief Executive Katherine Rich said "there isn't a labeling regime in the world" that could have prevented the death of somebody who chose to drink Coke in such large quantities.

The New Zealand branch of the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Company, the world's largest beverage maker, disputed the coroner's findings, noting that experts could not agree on the most likely cause of Harris' death.

Crerar recommended that soft-drink makers consider including caffeine levels on the labels and warnings about the ill health effects if the drinks are consumed in excessive quantities.

Under New Zealand's food labeling system, warnings are mandatory on drinks with caffeine levels higher than 145 milligrams per kilogram. That covers many energy drinks, but not most soft drinks.

Rich said the coroner's recommendations were well-intentioned but ill-informed. She said that coffee, tea and chocolate also contain significant amounts of caffeine and that New Zealanders are unlikely to support the notion of health warnings every time they walk into a cafe or buy a chocolate bar.

She said the huge volume of Coca-Cola that Harris drank meant she couldn't receive adequate nutrients from other food sources.

"It doesn't matter what the food is. If it's consumed in excess, there will be ill health effects," Rich said. "It's clearly a very tragic and complex case, but not one that provides a strong argument for changes to labeling."

At a 2011 inquest into Harris' death, Vivienne Hodgkinson, the mother of Harris' boyfriend, said that Harris always needed to have Coca-Cola available, and that if she ran out she would "get the shakes, withdrawal symptoms; be angry, on edge and snappy."

The coroner also heard evidence that Harris was of normal weight, didn't eat much or drink any alcohol, and smoked about 30 cigarettes a day. She drank only regular Coke, preferring the taste over diet or caffeine-free varieties. The coroner heard that Harris had no energy in the months leading up to her death, felt ill all the time and often vomited and experienced a racing heart.

The coroner said it was hard to be certain about how much Coke Harris drank, but after reviewing evidence from her partner and friends, as well as 51 supermarket receipts, he estimated it was between 6 and 10 liters (1.6 and 2.6 gallons) per day.

The pathologist who examined Harris found that she likely suffered from hypokalemia, or low potassium, which contributed to her health problems, and that she had an enlarged liver from excessive sugar consumption.

Another pathologist giving expert testimony said that excessive cola consumption "can be dramatically symptomatic, and there are strong hypothetical grounds for this becoming fatal in individual cases."

But a third pathologist giving evidence for Coca-Cola said that Harris' health problems could have been caused by anemia or diabetes, and that genetic factors may also have played a role.

In a statement, Coca-Cola Oceania said it was disappointed the coroner chose to focus on "the combination of Ms. Harris' excessive consumption of Coca-Cola, together with other health and lifestyle factors, as the probable cause of her death. This is contrary to the evidence that showed the experts could not agree on the most likely cause."

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