Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Alcohol Health Alliance UK

1. About the Alcohol Health Alliance UK

The Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA) brings together over 30 medical bodies, patient representatives, charities and alcohol health campaigners to work together to:

- highlight the rising levels of alcohol health harm
- propose evidence-based solutions to reduce this harm
- influence decision makers to take positive action to address the damage caused by alcohol misuse.

The AHA is coordinated by the Royal College of Physicians of London. As an independent body representing over 25,000 fellows and members worldwide, RCP London advises and works with government, the public, patients and other professions to improve health and healthcare, and has been at the forefront of improving healthcare and public health since its formation in 1518. The RCP has published a series of seminal reports on alcohol including: ‘The medical consequences of alcohol abuse; a great and growing evil’ (1987)\(^1\), ‘Alcohol and the heart in perspective; sensible limits reaffirmed’ (1995).\(^2\) The first of these reports recommended sensible limits of drinking for men and women.

2. Introduction

The AHA welcomes the Alcohol Minimum Pricing Bill (Scotland), and supports its remit of introducing a minimum pricing policy which prevents alcohol being sold below baseline cost. We believe that enforcing a minimum price per unit according to the strength and volume of the alcohol will have a dramatic effect on reducing consumption and the harm caused by excessive alcohol consumption.

3. What are the advantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price?

The price of alcohol has declined steadily over the past fifty years, with off-licences and supermarkets offering deep-discounts and promotions to encourage alcoholic purchases. There is a distinct relationship between price and the consumption of alcohol, with affordability strongly correlated to demand; the School of Health and Health Related Research report highlights that that a minimum price of 50p per unit would:

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\(^1\) Royal College of Physicians. *The medical consequences of alcohol abuse, a great and growing evil*, Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1987

\(^2\) Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of General Practitioners, Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Alcohol and the heart in perspective, sensible limits reaffirmed*. Oxford: Oxprint: 1995
• reduce consumption per drinker by 6.9% on average, saving around 100,000 hospital admissions each year and 10,300 fewer violent crimes
• reduce healthcare costs in England by £66 million in year one and £1.37 billion over ten years
• reduce crime costs in England by £49.6 million in year one and £413 million over ten years
• save £28.6 million in employee absenteeism in year one and £238 million over ten years
• save £7.4 billion in direct costs over ten years.³

Whilst some commentators may advocate higher taxation of alcohol instead of adopting minimum pricing, the AHA argues that this is less effective in reducing health harms. Recent research in Finland, for example, found that when taxes on alcohol were reduced by an average of 33%, researchers estimated a 10% increase in consumption and recorded a rise in alcohol-related mortality for both men and women.⁴

4. What disadvantages can be discerned from introducing a minimum sales price?

It has been suggested that implementing a minimum price policy would adversely affect moderate drinkers. This is a misconception. Currently, responsible drinkers are actually subsidising the harmful drinking habits of 25% of the population who are drinking at hazardous levels. If a 50p minimum price was introduced, this would mean an increase in spending on alcohol of less than 23p a week per moderate drinker, whereas a harmful drinker would pay an extra £3.13 per week.

This increase only bears significance for the heavy drinking group, whose weekly alcohol bill would typically increase from £23 to £105.

5. Is the proposed minimum price level justified?

We are supportive of the introduction of minimum unit pricing proposed by the Scottish Parliament, and associated work with the University of Sheffield. A responsible unit pricing policy would not only have a positive impact on healthcare, it would help cut crime costs and workplace absenteeism associated with alcohol misuse.

Gemma Cantelo
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⁴ BMJ 2008; 337:a1504