Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Forrester Cockburn

Further to my previous submission to The Committee in December 2009 entitled “Children and a Civilized Scottish Society” I should be pleased if you would consider my further views expressed in the attached letters which were published in The Herald in December 2009 and September 2010.

Thank you for your consideration.

Forrester Cockburn.
Emeritus Professor Child Health
University of Glasgow

Alcohol carries significant risk of damage to unborn children

Who are the “sensible drinkers” that Gordon Brown and opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament “do not wish to penalise by creating a minimum price per unit of alcohol”? Do they include young parents, particularly young women of child-bearing age?

When women drink alcohol in pregnancy there is a significant risk of permanent damage to the developing baby’s organs, including the heart and brain. Infants born damaged by alcohol have the fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). They remain small throughout life, may require major surgery for their heart and other defects, and frequently have poor coordination, learning and behavioural difficulties, attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and a range of life-long educational, social and other problems.

Each year in Scotland, there are more children born with FASD than the total number of children with Thalidomide damage ever born in Scotland (“Thalidomide victims to get £20m payout”, The Herald, December 21). There is irony in the fact that Thalidomide was distributed in Scotland by the Distillers Company. Alcohol is a more damaging teratogen than Thalidomide but is still marketed by distillers and brewers without obvious public concern.

Former Deloitte director Tim Wilson says: “We are yet to be persuaded that minimum pricing would actually work as intended” (The Herald, December 22). Having observed the marketing strategies of the drinks industry over the past 30 years, to increase the alcohol intakes of young women, I would rather accept the unbiased opinion of Scotland’s Chief Medical Officer who strongly supports minimum pricing. I would also propose that warnings about the damage to the unborn child should be on the labels of alcohol-containing drinks. This should pose no problem for the drinks industry which is already obliged to print such warnings on alcohol exported to other countries.
The UK Government has entered into a commitment to implement the articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That declaration states: “The child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including legal protection, before as well as after birth.” The Scottish Government is trying to introduce measures to counteract our problems with alcohol. It is surely time that we, in Scotland, begin to understand and meet our commitments in respect of our problems with alcohol. After all, we are a civilised society and children are our most precious resource.

Forrester Cockburn, Emeritus Professor of Child Health, University of Glasgow.
Letter to The Herald December 2009.

Letter to the Herald 22nd September, 2010

Ethanol (ethyl alcohol) commonly known as alcohol is a fluid produced from sugars in industrial quantities throughout the world. Most is used for industrial purposes as a solvent and in Brazil it is used for its combustive properties to power motor vehicles.

In Scotland our important brewing and distilling companies produce ethanol to which they add water and a variety of flavours, colours and other chemicals and gases to sell for human consumption. The number of units of alcohol in each bottle of proprietary drink is based on the volume of ethanol each contains.

Advice on sensible drinking suggests a limited number of units intake per day and per week. This will prevent the average man and woman from drinking quantities of ethanol known to overcome the body’s defence mechanisms and cause permanent damage to brain, liver and other organs.

Shame on the three “Scottish” political parties which have prevented the sensible attempt by the SNP to emphasise, through a minimum pricing system based on units of alcohol, the dangers (particularly to young Scots) of drinking ethanol in industrial quantities.

Forrester Cockburn