Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

NHS Health Scotland

Advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum price

NHS Health Scotland supports the introduction of a unit based minimum price of alcohol for the reasons set out in the Policy Memorandum supporting the Bill. We agree there is strong evidence that increasing price reduces consumption which in turn reduces alcohol related harm\(^1\,\,2\). In a country where the increasing affordability of alcohol over thirty years has been accompanied by greatly increased alcohol related harm, an alcohol strategy that does not include raising the price of alcohol is unlikely to be effective. We agree that of the options available to the Scottish Government, a minimum price is the approach most likely to achieve a significant and sustainable increase in price of alcoholic drinks currently available at low cost in off-sales and which are particularly attractive to heavy drinkers and young people.

The level at which a minimum price should be set

The level needs to be sufficient to reduce alcohol consumption enough to impact on the negative effects of alcohol misuse. If not, a potentially effective policy could fail because the minimum price had been set too low. The recent publication by NHS Health Scotland of alcohol sales data shows that 45\% of all alcohol off-sales were sold at less than 40p per unit, 73\% at less than 50p per unit and 87\% at less than 60p per unit\(^3\). The modelling work carried out by the University of Sheffield for Scotland estimates that setting a level of 40p per unit would result in an estimated 2.7\% reduction in alcohol consumption, rising to a 7.2\% reduction at 50p per unit and 12.9\% at 60p per unit\(^4\). The proposed flexibility in the bill would allow the price to be set at an initial agreed level and subsequently varied if considered appropriate in the light of its effect on consumption and harm and to mitigate the possible effects of inflation on prices or incomes.

Evaluation

As described in the Memorandum, Health Scotland will be responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation and impact of a minimum pricing policy\(^5\). With advice from leading experts on alcohol related-harm and evaluation methods, we will ensure that the design of the evaluation studies will allow the impact of the policy to be assessed and any important unintended consequences to be detected and assessed. This will include differential effects or outcomes related to gender, age and socio-economic circumstances which may impact on health inequalities.

Chair and Chief Executive
NHS Health Scotland
30 November 2011
References