Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

NHS Lanarkshire and Lanarkshire Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (ADP)

The advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol

Advantages
The ADP strategy for 2011 – 2015 recognises the significant impact alcohol has on the health and well-being of our population, especially those living in our most deprived communities, where the alcohol related death rate in the most deprived 20% of our population is five times that of the least deprived 20% (ISD 2009).

Scotland’s CMO also reported that deaths from liver disease now account for one in 50 of all Scottish deaths, at a time when the rate in most Western countries is falling. Worryingly since 1991, the average age at which people die from alcoholic liver disease has also dropped from 70 to 55 years of age. Both in terms of direct costs, such as hospital services and the criminal justice service, and indirect costs such as loss of productivity and the effects on families, the impact of alcohol misuse on the Scottish economy is substantial. There are also increasing numbers of 16-24 year olds who are drinking above safe levels, while nationally over 65,000 children are living with parents who are currently experiencing alcohol related problems.

Whilst addiction services have in recent years tended to focus on the young and adult population under 55, the drinking habits of older people have traditionally not been regarded as high priority. There is, however, evidence of an increase in both binge drinking and alcohol dependency in older adults. Alcohol Statistics Scotland 2011 showed that 24% of men aged 65+ were hazardous or harmful drinkers, as were 11% of women in the same age group. Hence, older adults may benefit from age specific targeting and treatment as much as younger groups, and it is therefore reasonable to conclude that a minimum price per alcohol unit will have an impact on levels of alcohol consumption in this population.

We therefore endorse the proposals set out within the Alcohol Bill which adopts a whole population approach to tackling Scotland’s alcohol problem, including the proposed introduction of blanket minimum pricing of alcohol. This proposal is based on the most fundamental law of economics which links the price of a product to the demand for that product. Accordingly, increases in the monetary price of alcohol, including the introduction of a minimum price per unit would be expected to lower alcohol consumption and its adverse consequences.

Studies investigating such a relationship found that alcohol prices were one factor influencing alcohol consumption among youth and young adults. Other studies determined that increases in the total price of alcohol can reduce drinking and driving and its consequences among all age groups; lower the
frequency of diseases, injuries, and deaths related to alcohol use and abuse; and reduce alcohol-related violence and other crime.

Indeed the World Health Organisation (2009) also recognise the extent and consistency of the evidence that alcohol-related harm is linked to product price, with a particular impact on younger and heavier drinkers.

Disadvantages
There are no direct disadvantages in adopting this approach from a public health perspective, however depending on how it is implemented it will have little or no impact on those who tend to drink the most expensive drinks (it is feasible that some retailers will attempt to maintain price differentials). However, there may be other consequences of minimum pricing which need to be considered in any analysis of advantages and disadvantages. First there is the potential increase in profits for alcohol retailers under minimum pricing, and second there, potentially, could be the development of a black market in alcohol (depending on the minimum unit price).

The level at which such a proposed minimum price should be set and the justification for that level

We would support a minimum price of £0.50 per unit. The justification for this level is taken from the University of Sheffield’s Report (2009) which suggests that as the minimum price threshold increases, alcohol-related hospital admissions and deaths are estimated to reduce. At a national level this would see a reduction of 3,600 admissions per annum for a £0.40 price threshold compared to a fall of 8,900 alcohol related hospital admissions per annum for a £0.50 price threshold. In Lanarkshire alone this equates to a reduction of 367 hospital admissions and 907 hospital admissions respectively.

The report also notes that most of the prevented deaths over a ten year timeframe occur in harmful drinkers, while the majority of health related harms are reduced in middle or older age groups who are at significant risk of developing and potentially dying from chronic disease. The Sheffield Report concludes that as the minimum price threshold increases, healthcare costs are reduced. At a national level, health and social care costs will be reduced by approximately £60m for the £0.40 price threshold and £160m for the £0.50 price threshold over a ten year period. In Lanarkshire this equates to £6.1m and 16.3m savings in health and social care costs respectively.

The rationale behind the use of minimum pricing as an effective tool to address all types of problem drinking

Many of us have witnessed or been caught up in antisocial behaviours resulting from the worst excesses of Scotland’s drinking culture. There are significant numbers of people in Scotland, including Lanarkshire, who do not necessarily drink above the safe drinking levels, but who nevertheless cause themselves and others problems, often of a violent nature – this group of drinkers are often termed hazardous drinkers. The Sheffield Report (2009) found that minimum pricing is an effective strategy to reduce drinking
amongst this population as well as those drinking at levels harmful to their health.

Any other aspects of the Bill

Setting a minimum price for alcohol and ending deep discounting and promotions across the board will reduce the price gap between the off-licensed and on-licensed trade. Regardless of the level of minimum price set, the combination of these measures will have a major impact on the health of Scotland. It will lower overall consumption with significant health benefits for the Scottish population and will curb the ability of problem drinkers to get drunk cheaply.

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