BACKGROUND

Breakthrough Breast Cancer is a pioneering charity dedicated to saving lives and changing futures, through research, campaigning and education - removing the fear of breast cancer for good. Breakthrough has established the UK’s first dedicated breast cancer research centre, together with three new research units, including one in Edinburgh. Breakthrough campaigns for policies that support breast cancer research and better services, as well as promoting breast cancer education and awareness amongst the general public, policy makers, healthcare professionals and the media.

Breakthrough Breast Cancer appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Health & Sport Committee on the Alcohol (Scotland) Bill.

KEY POINTS

• Breakthrough Breast Cancer supports measures aimed at reducing the amount of alcohol people drink, such as those laid out in the Alcohol (Scotland) Bill.
• Breast cancer is the most common cancer for women in Scotland.
• Alcohol is an established risk factor for developing breast cancer.
• Breakthrough Breast Cancer is very concerned that future incidence of breast cancer may continue to increase unless action is taken now to reduce levels of alcohol consumption.

ALCOHOL (SCOTLAND) BILL

Regularly drinking alcohol is known to increase a woman’s risk of developing breast cancer, so Breakthrough Breast Cancer supports measures aimed at reducing the amount of alcohol people drink. Therefore, Breakthrough welcomes the measures laid out in this Bill.

BREAST CANCER IN SCOTLAND

Breast cancer is the most common cancer amongst women in Scotland:
• Breast cancer accounts for nearly 1 in 3 of all cancers in women
• Around 4,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year
• More than 1,000 women die of the disease each year
• Women in Scotland have a 1 in 10 lifetime risk of developing breast cancer

ALCOHOL AS A BREAST CANCER RISK FACTOR

Many research studies have now established that regularly drinking alcohol is associated with a slightly increased risk of breast cancer. The studies show
that the more a woman regularly drinks, the higher her chance of getting breast cancer at some point in her life.

It is believed that drinking alcohol changes the levels of hormones in the body, including the female sex hormone oestrogen. Oestrogen is essential for breast development during puberty, functioning of the reproductive system and the menstrual cycle. However, this hormone is known to stimulate the growth of many breast cancers. Some research studies have found that oestrogen levels are higher in women who drink more alcohol and this may increase the chance of breast cancer starting to develop. There may be other ways that alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer, however these are not yet clear from the research studies.

Breast cancer is a complex disease and we do not believe there is a single factor that is responsible for causing it. To improve our knowledge we set up the Breakthrough Generations Study to investigate the causes of breast cancer and, in particular, gain more information about causes that are modifiable, such as alcohol consumption. The study will follow 100,000 women across the UK over 40 years. It is likely that a combination of factors contribute to breast cancer. By examining the effects of genetic, environmental, behavioural and hormonal factors, we hope that the study will pinpoint the causes of breast cancer and how we can prevent this disease in the future.

Although there is still much to be learned about the causes of breast cancer, there is convincing evidence that the more alcohol women drink, the higher their chance of developing breast cancer in their lifetime. Therefore, Breakthrough believes it is important to act to reduce alcohol consumption in Scotland.

FUTURE LEVELS OF BREAST CANCER
Breakthrough Breast Cancer is extremely concerned that failure now to take strong action to reduce levels of alcohol consumption could lead to more women being diagnosed with breast cancer in the future.

Levels of alcohol consumption in a large sample of Scottish women were recorded in the 2008 Scottish Health Survey\(^1\). It reveals worrying levels of excessive alcohol consumption by women in Scotland:

- 20% of women consume more than the recommended limit of 14 units in an average week.
- 36% of women drank more than the daily benchmark of 3 units on their heaviest drinking day in the past week.
- 18% of women had been ‘binge drinking’ which is at least double the recommended daily unit intake on their heaviest drinking day (binge drinking is defined as more than 6 units).

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\(^1\) Scottish Government, 2008
CONCLUSION
In terms of future breast cancer incidence, it is very concerning that a large percentage of Scottish women consume more than the recommended limits of alcohol on a regular basis. If women continue to drink to excess, this may have a dramatic effect on future breast cancer incidence in Scotland. Therefore, it is imperative that decisive steps are taken now to reduce alcohol consumption in Scottish women.

In conclusion, Breakthrough Breast Cancer strongly supports the Scottish Government’s Alcohol (Scotland) Bill and hopes that the measures laid out in the bill will help to reduce alcohol consumption and, via this, future breast cancer incidence.

Audrey Birt
Director for Scotland
Breakthrough Breast Cancer
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