Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

School of Health Sciences, Queen Margaret University

I should like to submit evidence relating to the above Bill, particularly in relation to:

- The advantages and disadvantages of establishing a minimum alcohol sales price based on a unit of alcohol; and
- The level at which such a proposed minimum price should be set and the justification for that level;
- The justification for empowering licensing boards to raise the legal alcohol purchase age in their area to 21;
- The role of promotional offers and promotional material in encouraging people to purchase more alcohol than they intended;

We (Professor Jonathan Chick, Heather Black, and I) have produced a report entitled ‘Alcohol units consumed and price paid per alcohol unit by patients of the Lothian Alcohol Problems Services, with a comparison to wider alcohol sales in Scotland’. This report presenting data collected during 2008-2009, has been submitted to SHAAP (Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems) and in summary found that patients consumed on average 198 UK units in a typical drinking week. The majority of purchases were from ‘off-sales’ where the average price was 34 pence per unit. Overall the mean price paid was 43 pence, the minimum was 9 pence. There was an evident correlation between price paid per unit and total number of units consumed. Those consuming the greatest amount of alcohol tended to pay the smallest unit price. Only 17% of units were purchased at a price of 50, or more pence.

A research group at QMU (myself, Caroline Gibson and Maggie Nicol) have recently conducted research which may reflect the views of those healthcare workers likely to deal with the ramifications of Scotland’s drinking habits. We sought the views of Scottish healthcare students (of medicine, nursing and allied health professionals (NAHP)) about to graduate in 2009 and enter the workforce. We documented their knowledge and understanding of current UK guidelines around responsible drinking and their attitudes to four key proposals in Changing Scotland’s relationship with alcohol: a discussion paper on our strategic approach namely (i) the ending of ‘the promotion and loss leading of alcoholic drinks in licensed premises’, (ii) the introduction of minimum retail pricing and (iii) a ‘raising [of] the minimum legal purchase age for off-sales to 21’. In addition (iv) there is a commitment ‘to continue to call for a reduction in the drink drive limit from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood’. These research findings will be published in the journal Alcohol and Alcoholism in early 2010. Briefly, over three quarters of all students agreed with the proposed change to reduce the drink driving limit to 50mg/100ml blood. Less support was evident for the raising of the minimum legal purchase age for off-sales (37%), the banning of below cost price promotions of alcohol (47%), and minimum retail pricing (37%). However there were clear differences between the NAHP and medical students in the case of the final
two proposals; over 60% of the medical students agreed they would have a positive impact. For NAHPs figures were 41% and 31% respectively. There was some evidence of confusion around the difference between ‘off’ and ‘on’ sales of alcohol and the impact of legislation on sales from these outlets. The average age of the medical students was 23.5 years, the NAHPs= 24.3 years; both within age groups likely to be particularly affected by the proposed changes regardless of their ‘professional’ opinions.

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