The adverse affects of alcohol on health, health service related and societal outcomes are indisputable. Reducing alcohol consumption across the board but particularly in under-age drinkers, binge-drinkers and harmful drinkers is essential.

The Sheffield study has confirmed that there is strong evidence to suggest that price increases and taxation have a significant effect in reducing demand for alcohol and this is one aspect that the Government could explore. The specific evidence for minimum pricing is less robust, however, in terms of public health policy, minimum pricing might be used to specifically reduce the consumption of cheap drinks as these are more likely to be consumed by under-age and harmful drinkers.

One disadvantage of minimum pricing may be a small impact on moderate consumers of alcohol. However, the evidence would suggest that this is likely to be limited and out-weighed by the potential advantages of reducing the consumption of under-age, binge and harmful drinkers.

The level of minimum pricing per unit of alcohol requires further consideration. It would appear that in the range of 40-50p per unit might be reasonable. One point worthy of consideration is that the Department of Health in England is considering a 50p per unit price and the Scottish Government must consider the potential impact of establishing a lower minimum price in Scotland.

The Sheffield study suggested that under-age drinkers and young binge-drinkers were particularly sensitive to the price of alcohol as they tend to have lower disposable income. Minimum pricing may be more effective in these groups than in others.

Alternatives include raising prices and increased taxation. The concern here is that this would adversely impact on more moderate drinkers. Also it is likely that problem drinkers would simply switch to a cheaper form of alcohol rather than reducing their consumption. As there is some evidence that advertising is associated with alcohol consumption generally but particularly in young people and that promotions at the point of purchase influence overall consumption, review of policy around these areas is necessary.

In terms of legal alcohol purchase age we feel that it is important for there to be a uniform policy across Scotland and that proper enforcement of the current law and in particular proof of age might be more effective than further increase in the legal age for purchase.

Dr J Taylor
Honorary Secretary
RCSPG
22 January 2010