Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

Scotland Patients Association (SPA)

As ever we will reflect from the information obtained from patients, their relatives and friends.

We are most likely to be asked for support at a time of crisis when family, or friends, are at their wits end in trying to obtain treatment and support from the NHS, for the person whom they care about and who is addicted to alcohol. It is usually an adult who has passed beyond the point of responsible drinking, for whatever reason, and whose life is falling apart. Often the story is more complex than just alcohol addiction. There may be a history of depression and in one case the addition of an incident leading to post traumatic syndrome with the addition of serious suicidal thoughts. Alcohol can mask other illnesses which may also need diagnoses and treatment for which can take hours, months or years to achieve. There are no easy solutions to irresponsible drinking of alcohol and to its addiction.

Many theories may be offered as reasons why an individual’s apparent responsible drinking changes to irresponsible drinking and to addiction. Alcohol is the most affordable and easiest to access substance which people, of any age, may use to self medicate to make their life more tolerable.

Families who see a loved one destroy their health and all their relationships would perhaps consider a ban on all alcohol to be appropriate when they are in the depths of despair.

Irresponsible drinking and addiction to alcohol carries the greatest personal emotional and financial cost and to families and friends. There is an enormous cost to the state by loss of effective work from hung-over individuals, absenteeism not least in the NHS in general and the cost of liver transplants in particular, Police Service, Antisocial Behaviour and domestic violence to name a few.

SPA supports this Bill in principle as one useful tool in the fight to diminish Scotland’s irresponsible drinking of alcohol and alcohol addiction, with all the attendant consequences.

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

Many young people drink a great deal of cheaper alcoholic drinks before they go out for a night of drinking in retail establishments. Many admit that they drink for effect and so it is much cheaper to have a great deal of cheaper alcohol per unit on board (front loading) before drinking in pubs and clubs. Units are not understood by many and reliable information on the labels relating to alcohol content is required. An increase in cost per unit of alcohol may result in a reduction of the topping-up blood levels of alcohol before going out. This would be an advantage and may lead to a reduction in the all
over cost of a night out. Education is required regarding units and how they vary per drink as do glass sizes; a glass of wine may hold anything from a sixth to a quarter or even half a bottle of wine. Some people, even some adults think cider is non-alcoholic.

It is extremely important to reduce teenage drinking and it should be remembered that some children may suffer from undiagnosed depression and use alcohol to self-medicate for that condition. It should also be remembered that sometimes drinking alcohol is associated with the use of other illegal drugs and smoking.

Increasing the cost per unit would make alcohol dearer for the “responsible” drinkers on low incomes which may be considered by some to be a disadvantage but this could be an advantage if it prevented the “responsible” drinker becoming the “irresponsible” drinker who could become an alcoholic. When does the responsible drinker become the irresponsible drinker? The rich drinker would not feel any financial penalty and carry on as usual.

The bonus is that young people are likely to benefit most from an increase in the price per unit of alcohol and that would be worthwhile even if it costs some people more who are said to be responsible drinkers on a lower income, it may encourage them to drink a little less too which would be no bad thing.

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

SPA does not believe that alcohol should be sold for less than bottled water. We would need to depend on research to know what exact figure would act as a deterrent. Those who are addicted to alcohol will strive to buy at whatever price.

If retail outlets can sell alcohol for less than the cost to the manufacturer then SPA thinks this is unfair to retail establishments who cannot afford to sell so low. Cheap alcohol can be used as a loss leader to encourage customers over the doorstep and to buy more alcohol. Buying more can mean drinking more. To have a minimum price per unit should prevent the sales for example of “two for the price of one” and “happy hours”.

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

Of course minimum pricing will not catch all who are willing to continue to drink irresponsibly for whatever their reasons, and it will have little effect on the alcoholic who is willing to obtain their “drug” by any means, and at any cost, to them or their families.

It is essential to prevent the very young from becoming problem drinkers and the chance is that minimum pricing will benefit the very young and those on lower incomes. Meanwhile the government and parliament will need to work on; education of the young before they start drinking to prevent damage to
health; encouraging more facilities within the workplace and the community to support people who have become addicted to alcohol as well as their families; providing essential NHS residential places to allow people time to be weaned off alcohol.

Irresponsible drinking and addiction to alcohol has crossed all socio-economic groups for centuries. When people are clinically depressed and anxious, especially within poorer income groups, they have found solace in alcohol even during loss of income and loss of jobs, as happens in recessions. People need improved housing and job prospects.

Over decades it has become socially acceptable to drink alcohol; so easy to buy in a supermarket in addition to the other shopping and so easy to have that innocent regular drink to unwind after a trying day which could lead on to addiction. Cheaper alcohol makes it easier on the pocket and dearer alcohol doesn’t and may make people think twice before buying.

**Possible alternatives to introduction of minimum alcohol sales price as an effective means of addressing the public health issues surrounding levels of consumption in Scotland**

SPA believes that over the past decades it has become so easy to access low cost alcohol relative to income and this has helped accelerate the Scottish drinking pattern but there must be more to it than that. Why do intelligent people wish to damage their health and their relationships, and lose their jobs due to irresponsible drinking?

More education is required because there is great ignorance in understanding how much alcohol is in a bottle and in a unit. What is a unit?

It should be compulsory to label alcoholic content of all alcoholic drinks and that the labelling should be consistent for all brands, standardised so that there is no ambiguity and very easy for all to understand.

SPA think that it has been misleading to suggest “safe” levels of alcohol because what is a safe amount of alcohol to drink for one person may not be safe for another. More emphasis should be placed on education around this. Accepted legal limits of blood alcohol levels should be reviewed and lowered so that no one should be allowed to drink and drive.

We do not expect our pilots to drink before they fly and we should not expect other professions to be any different, for example health professionals and engine drivers. Irresponsible drinking the night before working can impair ability to work and the quality of that work. Some people would like mandatory spot checking in the workplace, such as happens with athletes.

How alcohol is advertised should be considered alongside advertising how to get help if you think you have a problem with alcohol. The law should be tightened around licensing of drinking establishments which allow people to drink to excess regularly. Pubs and restaurants should display information
Regarding alcoholic content of drinks in their menus. Promotions such as “Two for One” and “Happy Hours” should be banned because they encourage drinking more within a set time.

Perhaps a campaign to advertise how costly and embarrassing it is to Scotland as a nation to waste so much of our income and health to the profit of companies whose only interest is in selling alcohol and making a profit, at our expense. Scotland would have more to spend on the NHS for example on better cancer care and treatment, care of the elderly, and could reduce local authority costs if it did not have to clean up the rubbish and the vomit from our streets after so many people have been so called enjoying themselves. If Scotland drank more responsibly there would be a reduction in cost of alcohol related violence, in the street, at home and other alcohol related crimes. Perhaps the people who mess up the streets should be made to clean them.

More education and research is required within the NHS to allow general practitioners time and resources to diagnose and help the complex needs of some alcoholics and their families. More residential places within the NHS are required because, why people drink to excess can be complex. We need more Psychologists and Psychiatrists who can deal with depression in all age groups, especially the young. Depression is often diagnosed long after someone has become addicted and is more difficult to treat.

If it was less socially acceptable to drink irresponsibly fewer people over time would do so and so diminish their risk of ill health due to their drinking habits. Scotland will not be able to afford all the liver transplants which are required by younger patients as a result of their irresponsible drinking.

The advantages and disadvantages of introducing a social responsibility levy on pubs and clubs

Licensing regulations should be strict enough to include social responsibility and licenses should be removed if social responsibility and a duty of care to customers and the community is not observed.

Evidence of age should be mandatory before a young customer is served alcohol and if this were so, then raising the age to 21 years may not be necessary. It is always difficult to tell the age of anyone by plain observation alone.

Discount offers of alcohol which encourage some people to drink irresponsibly should be banned and this should be banned also in supermarkets.

Difficulties arise when people arrive in a pub or club with cheap alcohol already on board which has been bought from supermarkets. If people have been drinking a great deal before arriving in a pub or restaurant, but do not look drunk or behave in a rowdy manner, it is hard to hold an owner/manager or the licensee to be aware of all eventualities which could arise. It may cause
establishments to employ more staff and for security if they wish to evict customers who threaten the security of others.

If customers are rowdy when they leave any establishment, performing all sorts acts of antisocial behaviour, then repeated behaviour such as this should be investigated because it could be in part the responsibility of who sold the alcohol.

Promotional offers of alcoholic drinks should be banned because they can encourage those who already have more than enough alcohol on board to have yet another drink.

Supermarkets may use alcohol as loss leaders to get customers over the door step, to buy other goods. It may be a false economy buying cheaper alcohol because other items may cost more, including water.

Tap water should be available and free in all pubs on request and should be on the table in all restaurants, as it was in years past. If water is an added expense then people may just drink more alcohol which may be cheaper.

Governments over many years have gained excellent tax income from alcohol and cigarettes and to those who drink and smoke this is their justification to continue to enjoy their habit. It may well be that the true cost to the NHS of dealing with alcohol and cigarette related diseases and accidents, out-ways the tax gain.

Some people consider that it would be justifiable to put a levy on the manufactures of certain alcoholic drinks to pay the NHS, the police force and ambulance service for the extra work incurred due to irresponsible drinking of those who boast that they deliberately go out to get drunk and then cause damage to themselves and others, clogging up A&E departments. In doing so they are preventing other emergencies to be seen quickly. Perhaps there should be a fee set for health care at A&E which is found to be due to excessive alcohol intake.

Responsible mountaineers, who are well prepared for their trip, but yet have an accident which requires them to be rescued, go out with the best of intentions to be prepared and to look after themselves and try to avoid trouble, unlike the person who goes out deliberately to become drunk and in so doing is very likely to fall off their high heels and end up in A&E, deliberately abusing NHS and other Emergency services.

A social “irresponsibility” levy should therefore be shared by those who manufacture alcohol, who sell it and who drink irresponsibly.

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21 January 2010