Alcohol etc. (Scotland) Bill

Elizabeth Shelby

I am responding as an individual. In my capacity as an Alcohol Liaison Nurse, I have been proactive in the introduction of alcohol screening and brief intervention. I am hopeful that this, as part of a larger Government strategy can positively influence the health of the general public.

I am always interested to look at our society’s attitude to alcohol in comparison to that of illicit drugs. There would be no debate if this was a measure to reduce illicit drug consumption; however ‘our favourite drug’, alcohol has, for too long been seen as both a right and a reward without any emphasis on responsibility and consequences.

The general public needs strong guidance to change the trend of increased drinking levels and the unquestioned acceptance of the regular over consumption of alcohol, otherwise the future costs for healthcare will spiral beyond our means. How may the working man who drinks 12 to 14 pints on a Saturday while enjoying (or not) watching his local team be educated and discouraged from this behavior? The normality of such behavior does nothing to restrain this, nor will he connect this with an impact on health services that takes funding away from home nursing services for those who need it.

I work too often with those who have moderate to severe health consequences of alcohol consumption. The drinkers, who would rarely view themselves as ‘alcoholics’ have usually spent a lifetime of drinking heavily before the health effects become apparent and are not reversible. The devastation and strain on the family is the hardest to witness.

Having noted how our attitudes to smoking changed over the last 2 decades due to concerted and staged government action, I believe the same can be achieved for alcohol consumption. I would urge all parties of the Scottish Government to take a strong lead and listen to the scientific evidence that support’s fiscal controls to reduce consumption

In reference to the particular questions raised:

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

Minimum pricing will affect those at the lower end of the income scale who will reduce purchasing. Goods not viewed as essential are very responsive to price changes. Even those who are addicted and are on benefits will be forced to reduce consumption if cheap cider and spirits are no longer available. Even a reluctant reduction in unit intake will have a benefit for their health. The disadvantage is that this may be an unpopular action as viewed by the ‘working man’ which is why the Labour party may be reluctant to upset
their traditional voters. While everyone is responsible for their own choices, that responsibility has a price.

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

40p a unit would set the cheap high unit drinks at a deterrent level while not affecting the consumption of good quality beverages such as whisky. There can be no justification for a 9% lager being sold for less than the equivalent cost for wine and surely the only reason for drinking that particular lager produce is for intoxication (certainly not the taste).

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

The real price of alcohol has not kept pace with income. Shifting population consumption down by 5.4% will reduce the harmful drinking numbers, alcohol related deaths, the number of people likely to develop dependence and will reduce alcohol related violence

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

One alternative would be to reduce supply and make purchase more difficult. There could be a severe curtailment on the number of licensed premises per capita in any area and the removal of the sale of alcohol from supermarkets. This would of course affect even those who are sensible drinkers.

5. The advantages and disadvantages of introducing a social responsibility levy on on-sales and off-sales licence holders in Scotland (e.g. pubs, clubs, off licences shops etc)

This would be useful again for increasing costs and therefore charges to the public although targets all consumers. The cost to local police could be offset by making the levy higher in areas of alcohol related violence. High levies would discourage traders e.g convenience stores from stocking alcohol. Areas with little social disruption would be able to trade at reasonable prices.

6. The justification for empowering licensing boards to raise the legal alcohol purchase age in their area to 21

I think this should be mandatory for off sales. Drinking at home is a major change in drinking patterns and removes it from broader social interaction. Drinking within a social setting that encourages moderate drinking and monitors for intoxication (a pub with fully trained staff and good seating, soft or live music, diversions etc) should be allowed to serve alcohol to 18 year olds.
7. The role of promotional offers and promotional material in encouraging people to purchase more alcohol than they intended

Why encourage people to buy more than they want? But we are all susceptible to special offers and sales, so we feel we will miss out if we don’t take up the offer. Having more available only encourages more consumption.

I thank you for the opportunity to give my opinion and that the Bill receives support from all parties.

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