

Minimum Alcohol Pricing

On behalf of The Faculty of Public Health Medicine RCPI and Faculty of Public Health in Northern Ireland

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Dear Sir,

Over the past few months, we have seen that there is nothing like a pandemic to focus the mind both personal and political and to use this focus to implement radical change. The collective aim has been to protect the vulnerable, ensure our health services are not overwhelmed and ultimately to save lives. As we emerge from a period of restrictions there is an opportunity to implement a measure which could, albeit in a less dramatic and inconvenient fashion, fulfil those aims. Now is the time to act to introduce minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol on an all island basis.

Alcohol related illness and injury places a considerable burden on our healthcare system every year. There were over 17,000 alcohol related discharges from Irish hospitals in 2013¹ and with reports of 5.9 % of ED presentations being alcohol related, the impact alcohol has on our healthcare systems is undeniable². In its pre-budget submission for 2020, Alcohol Action Ireland estimated that alcohol related illness and harm would cost the Irish exchequer over €2.35 billion and strongly advocated for the immediate introduction of MUP. Modelling on the introduction of MUP for Ireland conducted in 2014 showed that the introduction of a 90c MUP would lead to an estimated reduction of 139 deaths and 4,102 fewer hospital admissions a year³.

Alcohol is associated with domestic violence, mental ill health, self-harm and suicide.¹ A worrying feature of the “new normal” is a reported rise in levels of alcohol consumption. Prior to the pandemic it was reported that 1 in 6 children’s lives were negatively impacted by parental drinking. Higher alcohol consumption coupled with the increased dependence of children on their parents and less outside support during the pandemic has the potential to further exacerbate this. The myriad other negative effects which alcohol has on health and wellbeing are likely to be compounded by the effects of the containment measures.

Previously objections to MUP have been raised regarding its impact on moderate drinkers, the concept of “the nanny state”, the potential for cross border trade and its resultant economic impact. Modelling suggests that the introduction of MUP would have a negligible impact on alcohol expenditure amongst those who drink moderately but could have a more significant impact on harmful drinkers and those who consume large quantities of cheap alcohol⁴. MUP is unlikely to have any effect on the pub and restaurant trade as the majority don’t currently engage in below cost selling and have advocated for the introduction of MUP.

The changes we have seen introduced in response to the risks of SARS-CoV-2 have presented opportunities to address these objections and point towards a level of tolerance for actions which aim to protect the health and well-being of citizens. Introduction of MUP is a feature of the 2018 Public Health (Alcohol) Act in Ireland and the Alcohol Strategy for Northern Ireland.

There is now a functioning executive in Northern Ireland and communication between the two parts of the island has strengthened with the aim of managing the response to SARS-CoV-2. Surely this is an opportune time to advance the introduction of MUP on an all Island basis to continue our efforts towards saving lives and protecting our health services.

References:

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