

10th February 2010

An open letter to Scottish Parliamentarians:

As scientists who advise governments across the globe on effective alcohol policy, we have been observing with interest and anticipation the approach that the Scottish Government has adopted in response to Scotland's growing burden of alcohol-related harm. Scotland's problems are not unique. Today, many countries across the world are experiencing a rise in alcohol-related harm. Harmful alcohol use is now recognised as one of the major risk factors for poor health globally. Nearly three million people die an alcohol-related death in the world each year which is of the same order as mortality from HIV/AIDS. Harmful alcohol use not only damages people's health, it can have a devastating impact on families and communities, compromising both individual and societal development.

The rise in alcohol-related harm in Scotland, as in other countries around the world, is linked to the increased availability, affordability and promotion of alcohol. The way in which alcohol is produced and distributed in many countries has been transformed over the past few decades. A process of globalisation and industrialisation of alcohol production has resulted in higher volumes of alcohol being produced at a lower unit cost, with large sums of money being invested in the promotion and marketing of alcohol brands. Along with this there has been in many countries a liberalisation of licensing laws that have led to alcohol being sold in more places, at more affordable prices, at virtually any time of the day. Supermarkets and all-purpose convenience stores have become main sources for off-sales, and have frequently used low prices of alcoholic beverages as loss leaders to attract customers. In Scotland and elsewhere, the relative price of alcoholic beverages in comparison to other goods has dropped markedly.

Many of the measures outlined in the Scottish Government's alcohol strategy are supported by an extensive amount of scientific evidence on what works best to reduce alcohol-related harm. Controls on the price and availability of alcohol are known to be two of the most effective means of alleviating alcohol-related problems. Establishing a minimum price for a unit of alcohol is an innovative measure responding to widespread concern about the availability and use of very cheap forms of alcohol, particularly amongst vulnerable groups of drinkers. Economic research suggests that minimum pricing is likely to have the most impact on the cheapest forms of alcohol and alcohol sold below cost. Although this particular measure has not yet been implemented in many places and has not been evaluated extensively, there is a generally positive experience in Canada with minimum pricing of beer, and the implementation in some Australian localities of bans on the sale of the cheapest form of alcohol (which amounts to raising the minimum price) has resulted in reductions in alcohol problems. Overall, the evidence of effectiveness of price increases in reducing alcohol consumption is very strong. There is therefore good reason to believe that minimum pricing will reduce the amount of drinking, particularly the hazardous drinking, that is linked to cheap alcohol.

For too long now the protection afforded to the populations of many countries against experiencing alcohol-related harm has been inadequate. Weak policy measures, such as education and 'responsible drinking' campaigns, have failed to prevent a rise in alcohol consumption and alcohol-related death and disability. However, there is growing recognition that the aggressive marketing of alcohol through price reductions and the lack of appropriate regulation of availability and price competition has generated the conditions for increasing levels of drinking and alcohol-related problems, particularly amongst poorer populations that

experience a disproportionately higher level of alcohol-attributable harm. Strengthened regulatory controls on health-damaging commodities such as alcohol are increasingly being viewed as necessary to limit health harm, and for the achievement of health equity. Other countries, like Scotland, are facing up to the reality of harmful alcohol use. Russia, in the grip of its own mortality crisis linked to alcohol use, has recently introduced a minimum retail price for vodka in an effort to stem consumption and harm. France, Italy and Spain are other European countries that have recently taken steps to restrict the availability of alcohol in response to rising rates of alcohol-related harm. Australia, following the lead of a number of European countries, has raised the taxes on beverages particularly appealing to young people.

That countries appear increasingly willing to prioritise the protection of public health over other private economic interests is encouraging. The scale of alcohol-related harm across the globe demands an effective national and international response. Our advice is that Scotland should implement a minimum price for alcoholic beverages, along with a strong evaluation of its effects. We look forward to the results of such an action, which will provide Scotland with concrete evidence as a basis for future policy, and will also put Scotland in a position to lead and advise the world on this important initiative.

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