

16 March 2009

Regional health boss backs call for alcohol pricing

Regional director of public health Professor Stephen Singleton today (Mar 16) welcomed the Chief Medical officer's call for a pricing policy on alcohol.

Sir Liam Donaldson suggested a minimum price of 50p per unit in his latest annual report.

Prof Singleton said: "The evidence is clear that the higher the minimum price the lower the levels of consumption, so this must be worth serious consideration.

"But just increasing the price of cheap drink in supermarkets will not solve what is a deep-seated problem in the UK.

"Our longer term aim is to change the culture around alcohol, especially here in the North East where binge drinking levels are among the highest in the country.

"That is why we established Balance, the first regional office for alcohol which was launched last month.

"Our colleagues there will be working with our regional advisory group on alcohol to foster a more mature attitude to drinking so people still enjoy a tipple but don't take it to excess - and drunkenness becomes socially unacceptable."

Sir Liam called for society to recognise the effect of 'passive drinking' in his annual report for 2008.

He wants to see a shift in public opinion on alcohol similar to the move to smoke-free public places, so that being drunk is no longer an aim of drinking nor socially acceptable.

He makes recommendations to the Government to tackle alcohol harm, and particularly the collateral damage to society, family members, the NHS, and the economy.

Speaking at the launch Sir Liam said: "England has a drink problem and the whole of society bears the burden. The passive effects of heavy drinking on innocent parties are easily underestimated and frequently ignored.

“The concept of passive drinking and the devastating collateral effect that alcohol can have on others must be addressed on a national scale. Cheap alcohol is killing us as never before.

“The quality of life of families and in cities and towns up and down the country is being eroded by the effects of excessive drinking.”

Sir Liam calls for:

- A national consensus, prompted by government, that as a country we should substantially reduce alcohol consumption.
- Passive drinking to be acknowledged as a key issue. It should present a consolidated rationale for action and be the basis of national campaigns.
- Licensing laws should reflect the full impact of heavy drinking, making public health considerations central to licensing.
- A minimum pricing of 50p per unit to be introduced to reduce the consumption of alcohol and its associated harms.

If a 50 pence minimum price per unit policy was introduced this year, substantial effects would be seen immediately, with the full effect seen by 2019.

Every year there would be 3,393 fewer deaths, 97,900 fewer hospital admissions, 45,800 fewer crimes, 296,900 fewer sick days, and a total benefit of over £1 billion. Research shows that the impact of price would be greater on heavy drinkers.

Sir Liam's annual report, *On the State of Public Health*, also addressed four other key areas of public health - prostate cancer, chronic pain, antimicrobial resistance and safer medical practice.

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Note to editors:

Sir Liam's 2008 Annual Report can be found at www.dh.gov.uk/cmo

Minimum pricing of 50p per unit of alcohol would mean:

- A 750ml bottle of wine (12% alcohol by volume) could not be sold for less than £4.50.
- A 700ml bottle of whiskey (40% alcohol by volume) could not be sold for less than £14.
- A six-pack of 500ml cans of lager (4% alcohol by volume) could not be sold for less than £6.
- A 2 litre bottle of cider (5.5% alcohol by volume) could not be sold for less than £5.50.

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