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United Kingdom Alcohol Epidemic: an Update Part II Has Government Action Impacted the Epidemic?

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"The strong strategies: Restrictions on affordability, availability, and accessibility, as well as drink-driving deterrence measures," Thomas Babor et al, "Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity."



In September, 2009, I released a report called "The Danger of Alcohol Deregulation: The United Kingdom Experience." It described a five decade process of alcohol deregulation and increased drinking. During that time, consumption by the whole population more than doubled, hospitalizations and deaths due to alcohol sky-rocketed, and underage drinking rose to twice the US rate.

This is the second in a three-part series on what has happened in the past three years. The first part documented changes in drinking problems. It illustrated that while overall consumption has declined somewhat, problems continue to rise. This part deals with the actions of the UK government to

quell the epidemic and why those actions have had minimal impact.

The UK has made many attempts to reduce problems: a large tax increase, a 2004 strategy focused on education and better enforcement, a 2007 strategy focusing on education and treatment, and a 2012 strategy that is comprehensive but still under discussion. As Babor et al have noted, policies to address the serious problems inflicted by alcohol "are too seldom informed by science and there are still too many instances of policy vacuums filled by unevaluated or ineffective strategies and interventions." (p. 257)

Ironically, the first strategy selected was one of the strongest measures recommended by public health officials: a major tax increase designed to increase prices. It failed to have the intended impact for two reasons. First, it was a single strategy when a comprehensive program of multiple strategies was needed. Second, the tax was generally not passed on to the consumer. The reason is that the UK retail marketplace is dominated by large supermarket chains that were able to absorb the tax increase or pass it back to the supplier. Thus, the price of alcohol continues to be very cheap.

The second problem with the government's approach was to focus on education and persuasion. According to Babor and his associates, education measures such as mass media campaigns, warning labels, signs and

social marketing simply do not change behavior. While education is important for raising awareness, it will not likely improve problems.



A final issue relates to the time it takes to make changes in a democratic regime. We are not like the Russian federation where President Putin was able to close all casinos at once when problems persisted. We have a deliberative process which allows considerable discussion and input from many stakeholders. During a recession, there is great fear that new regulation will hurt local businesses. And, once new laws are passed, they are often given an effective date at some time in the future. It also takes time to gear up for change.

Prime Minister David Cameron has a 27-page strategy that features a required minimum price and a ban on "multi-buy" promotions. These measures should be sufficient to increase the price for low-end products. The strategy also includes measures addressing outlet density, curbs on late-night premises, better enforcement, improvements in serving practices as well as more education. The difficulty is that it will take time for these to actually be implemented. Likely, there will be lawsuits that may prevent some of the stronger measures from coming to pass. This should give our policy-makers pause when considering deregulation.

We have an opportunity to see what happens when alcohol is substantially deregulated. Washington State passed a ballot measure that privatized spirits and changed laws to deregulate the sale and

marketing of wine and spirits. A new system of fees will keep the price of most spirits products very high. However, the initiative also removed virtually all bans on promotions that temporarily drop the price to lure customers in stores. The initiative also gives the sponsor, Costco, price advantages that could allow it to undercut other stores. This could mean some cheap alcohol products would regularly be available in many stores, particularly Costco.

The primary message to be gained from these examples is that alcohol regulations should be changed very carefully after full consideration of credible scientific research and a review of likely marketplace outcomes.

Stay tuned. Next month's newsletter will deal with Part III of the Update: Is it likely that the US will experience a similar epidemic?

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