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- Health
- Education
- Investigations
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- The Diary
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Minimum pricing benefits not just small beer - study

October 22, 2012

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Alcohol consumption ... fell by 8.5 per cent under a 10 per cent rise in the minimum price of alcohol in a Canadian study.

THE evidence in favour of minimum pricing for alcohol is so strong it is only a matter of time before it is introduced, says the author of new research finding the policy had drastic effects when it was implemented overseas.

The Canadian study found a 10 per cent rise in the minimum price of alcohol was linked to a nearly 8.5 per cent fall in alcohol consumption.

The Preventative Health Taskforce, which advises the federal government, is expected to deliver this week or next the findings of a draft report into the issue of minimum alcohol pricing.

The concept has been condemned by the liquor industry, which says it will unfairly affect older, poorer customers and do nothing to stop risky drinking.

However, the author of the Canadian study, Tim Stockwell, said research indicated the

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measure was one of the most effective policies the government could implement to stop alcohol-related harm.

"The evidence seems to be very clear that there's an overall massive health benefit when you do this," Professor Stockwell said. "Deaths from liver cirrhosis plummet. People say, 'The alcoholic is always going to get their drink', but that doesn't apply in every case, otherwise you wouldn't see deaths from liver cirrhosis drop."

His study, which was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, found that the bigger the increase in the minimum price, the bigger the effect on consumption.

High-strength beer, wine and cocktails were most affected by the price changes - high-strength beer consumption fell by 22 per cent after the minimum pricing increase.

Professor Stockwell agreed that an increase in the minimum price of alcohol would hit poorer people harder, but his study showed it changed the behaviour of most drinkers.

"The heavy drinkers go for cheap stuff anyway, but this was switching everybody to go for low-alcohol-content drinks ... Most people have a limit on their incomes, and so it does affect most people," he said.

Professor Stockwell, who previously worked in Perth and was responsible for implementing compulsory labelling on the number of standard drinks in alcohol in Australia, said any move to introduce minimum pricing was likely to be unpopular and subject to intense industry lobbying.

"We have done some opinion poll work and most people don't believe - about 85 per cent don't believe - that if you increase the price of alcohol, then heavy drinkers will drink less and the annoying thing is they are totally wrong," he said.

When Australian governments were implementing standard drink labelling, some in the liquor industry had fought the process and claimed it violated international trade laws, he said.

"There was all manner of politicking that went on. I think minimum pricing will be the same sort of deal," he said.

The co-chairman of the National Alliance for Action on Alcohol, Mike Daube, said he would be surprised if the Preventative Health Taskforce did not recommend minimum pricing be at least considered.

"The Canadian research shows you can implement minimum prices in a smart way," Professor Daube said. "You can reduce alcohol consumption in high-risk groups and you can get people drinking less harmfully."


At the moment, the Australian tax system was skewed in favour of cheap alcohol, with cask wine available that was cheaper than bottled water, he said.

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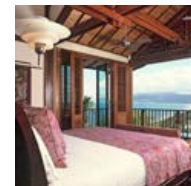
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