

Experts urge Chancellor to 'crack down on cheap drink' in next week's budget

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Experts are today urging the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne to 'stand by the government's commitment to crack down on cheap drink' by retaining the alcohol duty escalator in next week's budget.

Writing in *BMJ*, Katherine Brown, Director at the Institute of Alcohol Studies, says the UK chancellor should resist industry lobbying to scrap the annual rise in alcohol duty because "society simply can't afford for such cheap drink to get cheaper."

The duty escalator has been in place since 2008 to ensure that the price of alcohol rises at 2% above inflation. But a campaign by the wine and spirits industry is calling on the Chancellor to "Be Fair George!" and scrap the duty escalator for all alcohol in this year's budget.

Last year, following a similar campaign from the brewing sector, the Chancellor announced that beer would be exempt from duty increases – a decision that saw him awarded the prestigious title of "Beer Drinker of the Year" by the drinks industry funded All Party Parliamentary Beer Group.

In January, *The BMJ* also exposed aggressive lobbying tactics by global alcohol producers in an attempt to scupper plans for minimum unit pricing.

Given the burden of harm seen across society as a result of cheap drink,

would this be fair to the public as a whole, asks Brown?

Each year the UK is faced with more than 8,700 [alcohol related deaths](#) and 1.2 million hospital admissions, with alcohol estimated to cost society more than £21 billion – more than double the £10 billion revenue generated from alcohol taxes, she explains.

Evidence suggests that reducing the affordability of alcohol is the most powerful tool at a government's disposal to tackle the problems associated with alcohol. Yet alcohol remains 61% more affordable today than in 1980 as real household disposable incomes have risen significantly more than alcohol prices, "and it seems that one of the biggest barriers to tackling this is the power of the drinks industry."

If the Chancellor succumbs to current industry pressures and scraps the planned duty escalator for all alcohol in this year's budget, it is estimated that the cost to the Exchequer would be £110 million in 2014/15, she writes. "This sum could fund 2,587 alcohol nurses in A&E, 468,085 ambulance call-outs, or over 723,684 days of in-patient detoxification services."

Reneging on yet another government commitment to tackle the affordability of alcohol, and at the same time depriving the public purse of millions of pounds "would be a gross injustice to British society and to our public services that are struggling to cope with the burden alcohol poses day in day out," she argues.

She calls upon the Chancellor "to maintain the [alcohol](#) duty escalator and stand by the government's commitment to crack down on cheap drink. Be fair George - to us all."

More information: www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.g2060

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