Reviewer's report

Title: A minimum price per unit of alcohol: A focus group study to investigate public opinion concerning UK government proposals to introduce of new price controls to curb alcohol consumption

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Reviewer: John Holmes

Reviewer's report:

This paper provides qualitative evidence on from UK focus groups on the public's attitudes and beliefs around proposed minimum unit pricing policies for alcohol. Although the paper offers a useful and new contribution to this area of policy debate, it require substantial revisions to ensure evidence is fairly represented, readers are able to judge the quality of the research and the paper is easier to read.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. One major concern with the paper is the way sources of evidence are used. In several places, claims are referenced to inappropriate or out of date sources or previous evidence is not appropriately or accurately described. Examples include:
   - p.6 Below cost selling definition was agreed many months ago (duty+VAT)
   - p.7-8 "A minimum price would not lead to increases in the household expenditure of moderate drinkers" They key evidence for this is the work referenced by Meier et al. which clearly shows moderate drinkers' spending would increase albeit by less than that of harmful drinkers.
   - p.8 Ref: 32 - health practitioners including doctors have repeatedly endorsed minimum pricing (and the authors reference several instances of this) so a survey of medical students is not acceptable to support claims health practitioners are unconvinced.
   - p.25 Ref 33 - is presented in a discussion of UK public opinion without noting this is an Australian study.
   - p.27 Ref 20 does not contain evidence of disporportionate effects on those from disadvantaged backgrounds -it merely notes concerns exist around this. In fact there is inconsistent evidence on this (see studies by IFS and Ludbrook).
   - p.30 Ref 44 refers to alcoholism whereas the discussion is about general consumption.

These are the most obvious examples and I have not checked all sources to confirm claims made in the text.

A broader point about sources of evidence is that much of the evidence is taken from secondary sources (e.g. meeting reports, committee reports) rather than
primary research. As noted above, the key evidence base for minimum pricing is the modelling work of Meier et al. and many of the secondary sources are drawing on this.

2. I have serious concerns regarding the methodology of the focus groups. At three separate points in the text introducing the study the authors say they assumed the public would generally hold negative views towards minimum pricing. They then state in the methodology "the analysis was conducted with no prior assumption regarding participants' perceptions of...minimum pricing". Given the concerns I will outline below regarding balance in presentation of the findings and the methodology which involved the researchers explaining the policy to participants, this raises important questions around the integrity of the project. Given these prior assumptions have been made clear, I would insist that the researchers clearly detail how these assumptions may have affected the results, whether they influenced how the policy was explained to participants and give much greater detail in explaining the information about the policy which was provided to participants. I would also note that such prior assumptions are inconsistent with the claimed "inductive approach" to analysis.

3. The paper is unnecessarily long in my view, particularly given much of the material is repetitive and could be better structured. My suggestions to address this are:
   - The recommended responses which follow each set of results overlap considerably and do not need to be given separately. A discussion section after all of the results would allow the authors to condense this into a much briefer and more coherent set of general recommendations.
   - The background section is overly long and contains repeated information (e.g. stating the effectiveness of price policies on p5 and restating on p7) without properly describing the anticipated effects of minimum pricing which become relevant later (e.g. differential impact on different types of drinkers). A concise summary of the relevant evidence on burden of harm, price and minimum pricing, the current policy position and the arguments against would suffice.
   - The writing style generally has a repetitive tendency with phrases like "people's attitudes and beliefs concerning proposed introduction of a minimum price per unit of alcohol in the UK" or the prior assumption about people's attitudes being used repeatedly rather than being shortened or taken as read on later use. In the results, sections, subsections and sub-sub-sections are introduced using similar statements about the findings.

4. My reading of the results left me unconvinced the authors give sufficient balance in summarising their findings. The abstract states "there was little evidence to suggest that people would support the introduction of a MUP policy" and the results state "There was an overall opposition to the policy". However, two sections are presented showing qualified support and quotes are presented showing unqualified support. Also, other respondents believe the policy will have an effect but not that it will be seen at the population level. I appreciate the authors communicate this in their discussions and also offer more context to the
quotes which partially explain their interpretations; however, I feel the summaries of the evidence do not communicate these more nuanced aspects of the evidence.

5. Setting aside concerns about prior assumptions of negative attitudes. I would still have liked to see much more information on how minimum pricing was described to participants. For example, was it explained to participants whether prices in the on-trade would be largely unaffected? Were participants given any insight into the evidence around who spends what on alcohol? Were participants only shown lowest prices for each beverage or were they shown a range of example prices? All of this should then be reflected on in the limitations of the research.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. p.4: Does £2.7bn refer to per annum?
2. p5 para 1: Tax does not necessarily raise the price of all alcohol - retailers have the option to pass through as they choose. More accurate to say it applies to all alcohol.
3. p.6 para 1 Scotland bill has now been published
4. p7 and other places - avoid use of hazardous drinkers to describe all those drinking over limits. Hazardous drinkers has been used in guidelines to refer to a specific group lying between moderate and harmful consumption.
5. p10 para 2: How do the authors define hazardous drinkers?
6. At several points the authors suggest the price of alcohol for moderate drinkers is unchanged. This is not the case. All drinkers face the same price changes and all drinker types buy below MUP alcohol. However, it is the proportion and overall quantity of alcohol which is MUP for each drinker group which determines the impact. As a result the authors should say that the impact on moderate drinkers will be smaller but not that the cost is largely unchanged or that moderate drinkers are not affected.

Discretionary revisions:

1. The participants comments read very much like the arguments made by the alcohol industry and the manufacturers in particular. It would be nice to have some reflections on this and how the industry appears to be winning the public debate. Many letters to newspapers from the industry are available on line to source such a discussion.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

Our research group has received funding from the Scottish Government, UK Department of Health and National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence to appraise the effectiveness of minimum pricing policies.