

Minimum pricing back on the agenda

✘ Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon has called on MSPs to do the right thing and support minimum pricing when the entire Scottish Parliament votes on the issue for the first time this week.

Her appeal comes after more than 160 leading figures from across Scotland voiced their support for the policy by signing a full page advertisement placed in the today's Sunday Herald by the British Medical Association. The signatories included doctors, publicans, hoteliers, psychiatrists, public health officials, police officers, celebrities and representatives from the drinks industry.

Minimum pricing is part of a package of measures being put forward to help bring an end to Scotland's booze culture and unenviable reputation as a nation of heavy drinkers.

The issue has already been debated by the Scottish parliament's Health and Sport committee, but Wednesday's debate will be the first opportunity for all MSPs to cast their votes.

Ms Sturgeon said:

"I am delighted to see that so many people from all sections of Scottish society agree that minimum pricing is an important step forward in our efforts to combat the shocking toll that alcohol misuse takes on this country. I firmly believe the time has come to take bold, decisive action to tackle Scotland's damaging relationship with alcohol. Minimum pricing would save lives, reduce hospital admissions and improve the nation's health.

"There is clear evidence that as alcohol has become

significantly more affordable, consumption has rocketed. Alcohol misuse costs the economy an estimated £3.56 million a year. Deaths from alcohol related conditions have doubled in the past 15 years and now stand at 1,500 a year. Scotland cannot afford – in human or economic terms – to allow this to continue. I call on MSPs to put aside political differences and grasp this opportunity to support minimum pricing. It is the right thing to do.”

Chief Medical Officer Dr Harry Burns said:

“The support we have seen for minimum pricing has been very heartening, but I am not surprised because it reflects the depth of feeling I have encountered from many different groups across Scottish society who understand that we need to do something about alcohol misuse in this country now.

“The medical profession realises that reducing alcohol consumption, by even modest amounts, will pay benefits in a short time. We would start to see the number of deaths fall almost immediately. I have been convinced by the evidence that shows minimum pricing is a quick and effective way to tackle problem drinking and save lives.

“Minimum pricing offers an opportunity to have an immediate impact on the societal damage caused by excess alcohol consumption. Please take it.”

As well as minimum pricing, the Alcohol (Scotland) Bill also proposes:

- * A ban on irresponsible off-sales promotions which encourage excessive drinking
- * New requirements for health boards to become involved in the licensing process
- * Powers to stop abuse of occasional licences
- * Introducing a ‘social responsibility fee’ on some retailers to offset the costs of dealing with drink problems

Ms Sturgeon has also proposed introducing a sunset clause to allow the parliament to assess the effectiveness of minimum pricing after five years and, if it has not proved effective, to revoke the policy.