STRONG CIDER SOLD IN SCOTLAND APPEARS TO BE ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY FOR DEPENDENT DRINKERS

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Letter to the Editor

STRONG CIDER SOLD IN SCOTLAND APPEARS TO BE ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY FOR DEPENDENT DRINKERS

Sheron et al (Clinical Medicine, 2015) suggested strong cider (> 6.0% ABV) in the UK was particularly associated with alcohol-related illnesses.

Beeston et al (2013) reported that in 2012 in Scotland 326,975 litres of pure alcohol were sold as strong cider off-license excluding unknown sales in discount supermarkets, Lidl and Aldi, whose share of total alcohol sales was thought to be 10%.

To estimate the contribution made by ill drinkers’ purchases of strong cider to total purchases of strong cider in Scotland, we extrapolate from information obtained from two samples.

1. Acute general hospitals

In 2011/12, 24,742 unique patients age >19 were discharged from Scottish acute general hospitals with alcohol-related diagnoses (ISD, 2013).

In that year we interviewed 190 patients age19+ in acute general hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh admitted with an alcohol-related condition (Black et al, 2014). Their age range mirrored national hospital data except for a slightly lower % aged 65+. When averaged across all patients the strong cider consumption in their past and/or a typical week was 42u/patient (1 unit = 8g ethanol).

If drinking that way for 1 week in 4 (13 weeks/year), the year’s consumption per patient of strong cider is 550u, which extrapolated to the 24,742 individual such patients admitted across Scotland amounts to 14,293,550u = 142,936L pure alcohol sold as strong cider. This accounts for 43.7% of sales of strong cider in that year.

2. Alcohol treatment services

We interviewed 449 patients attending or admitted to NHS alcohol services in Glasgow and Edinburgh (no patient interviewed twice - if also seen in the general hospital they were not re-interviewed). Such patients overwhelmingly meet clinical criteria for ‘alcohol dependence’. They consumed, on average, 59u/patient as strong cider in their past week and/or typical drinking week: at 13 such weeks/year = 767u/year.

The Scottish Health Survey (SHeS, 2014) estimates that 1% of the population are ‘dependent’ drinkers (scoring 20+ on AUDIT) across the age span that corresponds to that of our sample (i.e. mainly age 30 to 65). Using the Census estimate for that age group in Scotland, that extrapolates to 55,410 individuals. If their consumption of cider was similar to that of our patients, this accounts for (767 x 55,410) units = 424,994L pure alcohol sold as strong cider per annum, slightly more than the reported national strong cider sales for that period.

Discussion

Our finding(2) suggests purchases of strong cider in national sales data could all be accounted for by people dependent on alcohol. However, only some scored in surveys as ‘dependent’ would consume as heavily as those who attend treatment, making our extrapolation somewhat excessive. Furthermore, a tiny proportion of strong cider is expensive craft cider purchased by aficionados.
On the other hand, if our conservative 13 weeks/year for their cider consumption was low, estimates of cider purchased by dependent drinkers in Scotland over a year might exceed the amount in national sales, even allowing for sales in Lidl/Aldi; and we are not adding our estimate obtained in (1) above to the estimated total for dependent drinkers (2). However, the estimate given in (1) adds weight to our conclusion from (2) that most if not all customers of the cheap strong cider industry are dependent, and possibly ill, drinkers.

References


Black H; Michalova L; Gill J; Rees C; Chick J; O'May F; Rush R; McPake B (2014) White cider consumption and heavy drinkers: a low-cost option but an unknown price Alcohol and Alcoholism 49 (6): 675-680

