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Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:00:20] Hi, everyone and welcome to this new episode of Café Connect where we bring you the latest research from the University of Aberdeen. My name is Barbara Gorgoni and I am part of the Public Engagement with Research Unit here at the University. In this series, we meet different researchers who talk about their work and its relevance to our life. If you have any questions or comments, we would love to hear from you. Please email PERU@abdn.ac.uk and we will put your questions and comments to our speakers. Keep in mind, however, they won't be able to answer any personal or medical questions. So, today I am delighted to welcome two speakers: Professor Paul McNamee from the Health Economics Research Unit at the University of Aberdeen and Lucie Giles, Public Health Intelligence Principal at Public Health Scotland. We will discuss minimum unit pricing for alcohol that was introduced in Scotland a few years ago, and what impact this has had. So, welcome both.

Lucie Giles [00:01:41] Thank you.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:01:44] So, I'll start off by asking Lucy, what does a Health Intelligence Principal do?

Lucie Giles [00:01:51] It's a good question, Barbara. Thank you very much for asking it. So, basically, as a Public Health Intelligence Principal, I lead a team of people to, essentially, synthesize evidence around public health interventions that, you know, evidence that would show whether those interventions are impactful or not and have an impact on health at a population level. We can use that evidence then, to inform, help and form policy and then we can also monitor trends in certain diseases, monitor how trends in diseases are changing over time and maybe differentiate them by different subgroups, hence things like deprivation impact on different diseases. And we also use all of that information and evidence to conduct research and evaluations around interventions that have been implemented and what the impact of those things are. My particular area of work is very much around alcohol, and I am involved in the evaluation of minimum unit pricing which is obviously what we are here to talk about today.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:02:55] Thank you! And then can we start by talking a little about this minimum unit pricing policy that was introduced and what it means in terms of the price of alcohol, and why and when it was introduced in Scotland?

Lucie Giles [00:03:15] Of course! So, essentially, minimum unit pricing sets a price floor for all alcohol and beverages that are sold in Scotland, whether that be through supermarket shops or through pubs, clubs and restaurants. That's currently set at 50 pence per unit of alcohol, so no drink in Scotland can be sold below that level. It was introduced because of consistently high rates of harm, particularly to health. So, we have persistently high rates of alcohol-related death, alcohol-related hospital admissions and those are entirely avoidable. They're caused by alcohol, and they absolutely can be avoided. So, that's why the policy was brought in because there is a close relationship between the affordability of a product and the consumption rates that we see on a population level. So, it was brought in in Scotland in May 2018 and at the time it was brought in, it was unique in terms of the global public health picture. So, there were different forms of MUP that were brought in elsewhere but in terms of that floor price that was set for all alcohol and beverages across the whole country, we were the first people to actually do that. So, it's obviously very important that we evaluate the impact of that. There's an important aspect of the legislation as well that actually allows for, what's actually called a ... (4:38) and that allows for a period of review where the Parliament will take in evidence of the impact of MUP on a range of different outcomes and then make a decision as to whether the policy should continue.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:04:53] Okay, thank you. And so, do you know what the public attitude has been towards this policy?

Lucie Giles [00:05:00] So, as part of the evaluation we have conducted some research that's through the Scottish Attitude Survey and that was to really try to understand how people in Scotland did really feel about the introduction of the policy. In general, a greater proportion of people have been in favour of the policy being introduced than have been against it. And that proportion has increased over time, so several years before the policy was implemented, the proportion of people who were in favour and against, although there were slightly more people in favour, it was a closer approximation in terms of the proportion. Over time and suddenly, since the policy has actually been implemented a greater proportion of people are now in favour, nearly twice as many people are in favour of the policy as have actually expressed anything against the policy. The most popular reasons around why people are in favor of it are really just around general tackling alcohol consumption excessive levels in Scotland and trying to reduce the number of people who drink too much. Those that are maybe against the policy feel like that essentially, the policy potentially might not be effective, that no matter what you do, people will always drink, and it doesn't matter what price you charge for alcohol. So, these were the main reasons we were seeing around people being in favour or against the policy.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:06:26] And so, is this public perception then? Is this backed by your evaluation data? Are you in the position now to say whether the policy has worked or not in terms of people drinking more and how much they're spending on alcohol?

Lucie Giles [00:06:44] So, we have one workaround..., so we tend to use alcohol sales to monitor the population-level alcohol consumption. We've shown in the first year since the implementation of the policy that alcohol consumption at a population level has fallen by an estimated 3.5%. So, we have shown there has been a reduction in sales. It has been variable by different drink types, so we've seen a great reduction in cider, as you might expect perry and spirit. So, now obviously it's linked to the type of products that would fall into those categories that are probably being sold at a relatively low price relative to their strength prior to MUP being implemented. We have also shown that some products such as 45 ready-to-drink beverages that are less likely to have been impacted by the policy have increased slightly. But overall, the balance has suggested that sales and therefore the amount of alcohol that has been consumed have fallen. We are conducting a study that will publish next year, that is looking in a bit more detail at the impact on specific products rather than just at a category level. In terms of price, there have been a number of different theories about what might happen to alcohol product pricing after the policy has been implemented. So, for example, potentially the differential between products could stay the same and everything could just shift to the more expensive end or all of those products that are sold below 50 pence could just shift above the 50 pence mark and nothing else might change. And actually, from the evidence that we've presented and published, it's the latte picture that has happened. So, essentially what we've seen if we look at price distribution, products that were priced before 50 pence, have tended to just shift to 50, maybe 55 up to 60 pence kind of bracket and there has not been much change in the higher end of the market.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:08:45] Okay, that's quite interesting. So, are there any other areas of research that are being considered in terms of the impact the policy has had besides alcohol?

Lucie Giles [00:08:58] Yes, so, it's written into the legislation that we have to evaluate on a range of different outcomes and so those include not just the impact on those sorts of things like population consumption that we've already looked at. We are looking at specific parts of the population as well, so

we'll be examining the impact on harmful drinkers specifically. There's quite a bit of work around the economic impact, so how the policy impacts the alcohol industry cause that's obviously an important part to be considered as well. Ultimately, the aim of the policy is to reduce alcohol-related harm, that's primarily focused around the harm to health because there was a direct link between excess alcohol consumption and the risk to health. But there are also things like crime and other social harms to be considered. We've already published recently some of our evidence on crime and essentially, we found that there was not much impact on crime, which is both a positive and a negative, you might expect that alcohol-related crime would have fallen but a possible unintended consequence could have been things like, for example, drug-related crime could have increased, and we didn't find that that happened. So, there are some positives and negatives in there. In terms of the health harm that's the end result of this policy, it's to try and reduce the number of people who are hospitalized or dying as a result of alcohol. And that's a piece of work that we are working on at the moment and we will publish probably in 2023. So, we are looking at the impact of alcohol on a range of alcohol-attributable deaths and hospitalizations, and that will be the most important pieces of evidence that we'll publish.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:10:46] So, I'm going to turn to Paul now. Paul, can you start by giving us an overview of the research you are doing here at the University of Aberdeen on minimum unit pricing or MUP as we've been calling it?

Professor Paul McNamee [00:11:03] Yes, thank you. This project on MUP forms part of portfolio research in which we're looking at in terms of health behaviours, so looking at the influences of policy and other factors on why people do certain things in terms of their health behaviours. So, we look at alcohol, we look at physical activity and smoking and just some other things that were influenced. We are looking at the influences of policy and other factors on people's health behaviour. So, the MUP policy was funded by the Chief Scientist Office of the Scottish Government Health and Social Care Directorates and we're doing a two-year study. And what we are doing in this study is looking at whether the policy has some unintended consequences on people's food shopping. And on top of that, we are also looking at the effects on the quality of the diet and whether there are any health impacts or any changes that we see in the diet quality. So, we are looking at information collected by a market research organization, a very large organization called Kantar Worldpanel. So, this panel comprises around 32,000 British households at any one time and what happens here is that the same households provide information over time. So, what they do is collect information from households that have previously signed up to be part of their data collection surveys and there's a nominated member from each household, and what that person does is scan all of their shopping using a barcode scanner. What panellers also do, they also upload a digital image of the till receipts and that's used to verify the accuracy of the scanner data. So, what's happening here is that households are documenting all purchases irrespective of where that purchase was made. So, as a result of all this, we've got a very thorough idea of what was bought, how much is bought, when it was bought and how much they paid for it. So, really a great fantastic dataset that you would really like to look at for the effect of policy in terms of food. So, what we're doing then with that data, we are comparing the purchases in Scotland before and after the introduction of minimum unit pricing with the purchase made in the north of England specifically but in the whole of England, the policy hasn't been introduced. There's no plan, as far as I am aware, to introduce it. So, we do a before and after study comparing Scotland with the north of England and that allows us to estimate the effects of this policy. The other thing to say, we've got information also on other things in the household, such as people's income and also how many people live in the household. And that's very important because it allows measuring if any difference in the spending is due to the policy or is it actually due to other different household circumstances. In the final part then, when we've got all this food data, we can convert food spending data. We convert that

data into nutritional effects, so by that, I mean things such as fat, sugar, salt calories and we've got a nutritional expert in the project who helps us with this and takes a lead on it. And from there, we can then estimate the impact on health. So, does the change in calories or sugar lead to a change in the probability of developing things such as diabetes?

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:15:06] Okay. So, just to clarify, you are looking at general food shopping rather than alcohol shopping? Why is that? What's interesting about general food shopping if we are evaluating the alcohol pricing policy?

Professor Paul McNamee [00:15:28] We've got food data as well as non-food items in this dataset besides alcohol, so the reason for looking at this is some of the early modelling results before the introduction of the policy predicted there could be a rise, a small rise, admittedly, but a small rise in spending on alcohol. And there was some concern or interest, let's say around looking at the full impact of both anticipated and non-anticipated impacts of the policy. So, really looking at this policy realistically. And also, we can think about why we want to do that if we think about economics and the consumer behaviour theory. If we take economics first, we know that prices have an important effect on consumer behaviour. So price rise in one product should reduce the amount bought of that product and alcohol falls into this category, of course. And so, the interesting thing here, some of the early modelling studies showed that we expect people to have bought less alcohol because prices have gone up because of minimum unit pricing but they would actually spend more in total. And that's because the quantity purchased is less than proportionate to the price increase. So, they are spending a little bit less, they are buying a little bit less alcohol, but the overall alcohol spend for some people could actually be more. If they're spending more on alcohol what's actually displaced could be food and if they are buying less healthy food, let's say, is it unhealthy or is it healthy food they are buying less of and that thing hasn't been looked at and that's one of the reasons we are being funded to look at this.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:17:39] Okay, that's very interesting. And so, the research is still ongoing, I know you can't reveal all the findings yet. But what do you think you will find? Do you have any expectations?

Professor Paul McNamee [00:17:56] Yes, so that relates to some of the comments I just made that we might expect some displacement for some people. One of the reasons we think that then is how people buy their alcohol, lots of alcohol is bought in supermarkets, in the weekly shop. I think that Public Health Scotland has maybe done some work on this, to what extent do people notice this policy. There was quite a lot of publicity around the policy and at the time people would've noticed, depending on what they were buying, but many people would have noticed prices going up. And if you're doing your food shop along with your general shop, then we talk about a basket of foods. People might start to think about how much they are actually spending on food and groceries. Equally, they are possibly also thinking about how much they are spending on alcohol. So, there could be a reconsideration in terms of how much is being spent on alcohol, which might induce a reduction of that spending. So, it can go more than one way, it is not exactly clear what effect we could see. But there were some prior modelling studies done before the introduction of the policy and we could actually now see how this has all played out in practice. So, Lucy has mentioned earlier some work that Public Health Scotland have done showing that there has been a reduction in the amount of alcohol, in terms of pure alcohol bought, so, a figure of 3% as mentioned there as the amount of alcohol sold in terms of the total volume of alcohol in the year after the policy, so, there has been a drop-off. Another independent work has shown a reduction as well. So, one of the earliest studies by another academic group using the same dataset, the Kantar dataset, showed a reduction of purchases of just over a unit of alcohol per adult per week. And that was in the year following the introduction of the minimum unit pricing, so this was a result back in June through to the end of December

2018. So, there's fairly strong evidence that the overall amount of alcohol being sold in Scotland has reduced and there's also now good evidence coming on board around spending. We've got a range of estimates that range between something like £15 per adult per year to £25 per adult per year in terms of alcohol spending going up. So, the evidence overall is pointing towards the average household in Scotland is spending a little bit more on alcohol following the policy. So, I think still the question remains, it's still an open question, has there been an impact on food shopping. So that's what we are looking at in this study. We would expect to see possibly some changes in some groups, an increase in some groups, a reduction for other groups and in terms of overall population level, it could all balance out that there would be a very small reduction on either side in terms of food shopping. So, we don't expect to find major effects, I think that's our hypothesis that we are testing, if we expect to find an effect, we expect to find a small effect on the population level.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:22:05] Okay, so we'll need to wait a little bit longer to hear about your specific results. But once you have those results, what will you do with them?

Professor Paul McNamee [00:22:16] That's a very good question and we are always thinking about this in terms of any academic research, particularly policy-relevant research we are doing. So, this is a great project to be involved in because of the sunset clause that Lucie mentioned earlier, and how all of the research evidence will be fed through and collated together and that would directly inform the Scottish government decision, I think expected to be in 2023, 5 years after the introduction of the policy, inform that decision of whether to retain the policy going forward. So, our research will be part of that collaborative effort that's going to be happening. The other thing to say, we'll be doing other things, still, other countries are looking at what Scotland is doing in terms of what the impact has been, Ireland, Australia, I know those are a couple of examples and so we'll be publishing and presenting at the meetings where some of the voices and ears of other people will be there to just listen what we found. The other thing is, the Scottish government cross-party group on food meets fairly regularly and that's one avenue we'll be looking to inform on our initial and final conclusions. Finally, we'll be doing work with the public, I am going to say a little bit more about that and of course, the other things we'll be doing, social media, in our Twitter account once our reports have been published as in the public domain, which we anticipate will be from the middle of 2022 that we'll be publishing and highlighting them through Twitter.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:24:30] And so, thinking ahead then about the future are you looking into the impact of potential changes to the policy itself?

Professor Paul McNamee [00:24:41] Yes, so we are not formally considering this as part of our project, it wasn't written into our project plan when we received the funding, it wasn't a specific research question, but we are planning some public engagement work in the near future, we will be sharing some of our findings with local community groups. And the main reason for doing that is to get a sense check on the results but it's also clearly going to give us an opportunity to listen to people from different areas and different backgrounds. And as part of that, we think it will be a good idea to think ahead and think through when this review is coming, one of the things that might be on the table is around the prospects of a higher minimum unit price and that's already been talked about and suggested by some alcohol charities here. We're not aware of anyone doing this in terms of research yet, so we might be the first looking at this with members of the public if we start this activity quite soon in the next few months. So, it's interesting to consider and go down that avenue what the impact might be with a higher price because it does depend on what price is set. The price of 60 pence per unit is being talked about, there's even been a suggestion of 65 pence by one of the alcohol charities, I have seen that in the press fairly recently. And it's quite interesting to see actually where prices are currently set and how far away, they are from 50p per unit

already. My reading of this just recently is some of the beers and ciders are pitched around the minimum unit price and some of the wines tend to be a bit further away. So, the impact of any higher price is going to partly depend on retailers and what retailers do in terms of price promotion and of course it's also going to depend on what consumers do in terms of their responsiveness. Are some alcohol products more responsive than others to another price hike? The things that retailers talk about is price points being quite important and to what extent does a product just go above a certain price point or just come under a certain price point. So, I think that'll be interesting to look at and is something we do plan to look at in the near future.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:27:26] Thank you! So, yes, still lots of important questions that need to be answered and we are going to look ahead on your results and hopefully invite you both back, maybe, in a little while to find out more. I'd like to thank you both, Paul and Lucie, for a very interesting overview and insight into the minimum unit pricing policy and what could be some possible consequences of its introduction. And we are always interested in hearing the views of our audience, so if you have any questions or comments, please do email us at PERU@abdn.ac.uk and feel free to post questions or comments on this topic. And please keep your ears open for our next Café Connect podcast. Thank you very much for listening and goodbye.

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