

Issues and Controversies in Counselling and Psychotherapy

One Step Forward Two Steps Back

By Hamza Mahoney



As a nation, we introduced the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, 2018 to safeguard our population (especially the young) against excessive alcohol consumption. However, with the proposal and seemingly fast progress of the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill, will the signing of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, 2018 have been futile? Every counsellor, and especially those working with alcohol addiction, should be concerned.

Excessive Alcohol Consumption

What direction are we moving in with the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 and the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill 2022? There are more than 200 diseases, injuries, and other illnesses connected to the consumption of alcohol. Alcohol consumption increases the risk of developing mental and behavioural disorders, including alcohol dependency, in addition

to serious noncommunicable diseases such as liver cirrhosis, various types of cancer, and cardiovascular disease (World Health Organization, 2022).

Historical research shows a relationship between alcohol availability and drinking problems in Ireland. Evidence of this dates back to 1925 when the Intoxicating Liquor Commission of Ireland recommended several control systems. This supports the

argument that drinking problems are related to the ease of accessing alcohol (Butler, 2002). This relationship has impacted Ireland in a multifaceted way: in areas of crime, health (and alcohol-related admissions to hospitals) sociality, and workplace absenteeism.

The World Health Organization’s 2014 findings from the global status report on alcohol and health rank Ireland exceedingly high among one hundred and ninety-four countries. Thirty-nine per cent of the population over fifteen years old engaged in binge drinking which is defined as consuming more than six standard drinks in a single sitting (World Health Organization, 2014).

According to the latest Health Research Board (HRB) research on alcohol consumption, harm, and policy in Ireland, we rank ninth among the 38 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in terms of alcohol consumption and eighth in the world in terms of monthly binge drinking. The conclusions of the research highlight the substantial harm that alcohol continues to do to the health of individuals in Ireland. In 2017, there were 1,094 alcohol-related fatalities, an average of three per day. Over 70% of individuals who died from alcohol-related causes were under the age of 65, underscoring alcohol’s high rate of early mortality. Alcohol damage costs Ireland at least €3.7 billion per year (Alcohol Action, 2023).

Action Taken

On the 17th of October 2018, the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 (Act 24 of 2018) was signed into effect by Michael D. Higgins, the President of Ireland, in a bid to reduce alcohol consumption and harm caused by alcohol in Ireland. The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 introduced health warning labelling of alcohol products, minimum unit pricing, procedures about the exposure for sales, structural separation, and restrictions on advertising, marketing, certain promotional activities, and alcohol sponsorship (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018).

With almost five years having elapsed since the signing of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, with its 31 sections and negotiations with the EU, 27 sections have finally been implemented as of July 2023. Section 13 of the act regulates the content of alcohol product advertisements, Section 18 restricts advertisements in publications, Section 19 focuses on the broadcast watershed, and Section 21 of the act provides for a review of certain sections of the act that have yet to be implemented (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). These sections are extremely important but fall short on addressing alcohol advertising on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram.

Section 11 on minimum unit pricing is one of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 most prominent clauses. Several studies have proven that increasing the costs of alcohol has an impact on reducing the consumption of alcohol. As a result, drinkers purchase lower alcohol content beverages, and as a consequence, there's a significant decrease in alcohol-related deaths and hospital admissions. (Thompson, et al., 2016).

Ineffectiveness

Scotland implemented minimum unit pricing in 2018, and recent results

Ireland is the first country in the EU and the second country after South Korea to introduce cancer warnings on all alcohol products

(World Health Organization, 2023)

show an estimated 13.4% decrease in alcohol deaths, a 4.1% decrease in alcohol hospital admissions and a 3% reduction in alcohol consumption at a population level, as measured by retail sales (Public Health Scotland, 2023). Since its implementation in Ireland in January 2022, there is minimal evidence to demonstrate any such positive result. A significant impediment to the effectiveness of minimum unit pricing in Ireland is the reality of cross-border trade, whereby individuals from Ireland can purchase alcohol in Northern Ireland at lower cost, which costs the Irish Exchequer an estimated €94 million per year (Drinks Ireland Ibec, 2021).

Another important section in the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 is Section 12 which concerns health warning labelling on alcohol products. This requires that alcohol products sold in the Republic of Ireland follow mandatory labelling requirements (Drinks Ireland Ibec, 2021). A warning label detailing the link between alcohol and fatal cancers, or detailing the dangers of consuming alcohol while pregnant, or outlining calories and grams are examples. Ireland is the first country in the EU and the second country after South Korea to introduce cancer warnings on all alcohol products (World Health Organization, 2023). Health warning labels are designed to provide consumers with knowledge regarding the harm caused by alcohol while also seeking to dispel erroneous cultural notions such as wine being beneficial for one's health. The introduction of this section has been delayed until May 2026 to provide companies

ample time to prepare for the change. This delay is simply too long.

The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 was intended to reduce alcohol use by 20% but has yet to achieve this target due to a lack of progress on important restrictions.

Hindrance and Harm

There is another hindrance to this intention by means of a new Bill called General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol, introduced in October 2022 by Minister For Justice, Helen McEntee. All stages of this Bill are expected to be completed by this year, 2023 (Health Research Board, 2022). This bill aims to create a single piece of modern legislation to regulate the sale of alcohol in Ireland, creating a balance between maintaining the current approach to licensing the sale of alcohol, whilst simultaneously supporting the wider economy around hospitality and night-time culture (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023b). The bill will encourage alcohol consumption, as it aims for a general extension of all licencing hours for pubs and restaurants from 11.30 p.m. to 12.30 a.m. Late-night bar hours will be extended until 2.30 a.m. and nightclub hours will be extended till 6 a.m. The implementation of cultural amenity permits allows for extensions in venues that do not generally have them, including galleries, museums, and theatres. The requirement to extinguish a licence before opening a new site is also eliminated (Alcohol Action Ireland, 2023).

Moreover, the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill aims to regulate online alcohol sales by requiring payment in advance and requiring the person delivering the alcohol to verify that the person receiving it is 18 or older. This lays sole responsibility on the person delivering to verify the recipient's age. Could the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill not have put in

place more stringent age restrictions to prevent unlawful underage alcohol consumption?

“The bill could contribute to increased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm.” according to Professor Tom Babor of the University of Connecticut School of Medicine who examined the Bill. An example of a one-hour extension of closing times in Amsterdam resulted in a 34% increase in emergency calls for alcohol-related injuries (O’Keeffe, 2023).

Futility

As the World Health Organisation (2022) encourages governments to develop and implement a variety of appropriate policies to reduce the burden of harmful alcohol use, including regulating and restricting the availability of alcohol, it seems evident that the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill is working in the opposite direction with the wider availability of alcohol and longer hours to obtain it. Dr Anne Dee, Chair of the Public Health Committee of the IMO puts it plainly, “This Government does not have a coherent policy on alcohol. It makes no sense that, on one hand, it is looking to extend alcohol licensing laws while on the other, it is also looking to reduce alcohol consumption by 20%. This move is, at best, not thought through and, at worst, regressive and ultimately harmful.” (IMO, 2022) Increasing the hours of operation of establishments that sell alcohol could result in increased consumption of alcohol which contradicts the fundamental goal of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018.

Finally, there appears to be an inconsistency between the new General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill’s rate of advancement and the delayed implementation of the sections of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. Yes, the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill will improve alcohol licencing and

cultural offerings, but is this more important than reducing Ireland’s alcohol consumption? It seems like an exercise in futility. The General Alcohol Scheme Bill is an imminent threat to the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018.

Alcohol is and will continue to be a major part of Irish culture. High alcohol consumption and misuse will always exist. The Public Health (Alcohol) Act, 2018 and its many sections was designed to better safeguard the Irish population (especially children) by reducing excessive alcohol use and its subsequent harm. However, with the proposal and seemingly fast progress of the General Scheme of Sale of Alcohol Bill we are taking one step forward two steps back. ☺

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