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Alcohol price, policy and public health: embedding the principle in licensing legislation

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Over the last 30 years, UK liver cirrhosis mortality has risen over 450% across the population with a 52% increase in alcoholic liver disease in Scotland between 1998 and 2002. Despite the significant evidence base which identifies regulatory action as amongst the most effective alcohol policies open to government, alcohol policy in the UK and Scotland has, until recently, focused predominantly on interventions with the weakest evidence base – education and voluntary action by the alcohol industry. The status of Scotland's devolved government presents both problems and opportunities for public health advocates as the Scottish Parliament has control over some policy areas (health, licensing and criminal justice) but not others (taxation). However, the public health interest has been at the forefront of recent policy initiatives in Scotland. New licensing legislation has banned irresponsible promotions in the on-trade and the Government has pledged to extend the ban to cover the off-trade, as well as making it a requirement for shops and supermarkets to have separate display areas for alcohol. The foregrounding of the public health interest has been facilitated by the new Scottish licensing legislation which has embedded 'protecting and improving public health' as one of five licensing objectives. The Scottish Government has used price as a policy lever through the mechanism of the licensing legislation to reduce the burden of alcohol harm in the population signalling a move towards evidence-based population approaches in addition to initiatives aimed at specific groups of drinkers. The measures taken in Scotland suggest policy innovation when government has restricted powers and should be of interest to governments and public health advocates throughout Europe.