

White Cider and street drinkers

Recommendations to reduce harm



Alcohol Concern
Making Sense of Alcohol

Alcohol Concern

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol misuse campaigning for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol-related problems.

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Background to this report

In 2009 the Chief Executive of St Mungo's homelessness charity made a presentation to Alcohol Concern's annual conference. Subsequent discussions between the two organisations centred around two main questions: whether white ciders had a different impact on the health of homeless people than other high-strength drinks and if this was the case how to draw attention to the problem. Funding was secured from Alcohol Research UK (formerly the Alcohol Education and Research Council) for this brief study, which is largely based on questionnaires and interviews. Another homelessness charity Thames Reach, which has relentlessly campaigned on the issue of super-strength drinks since 2005, later contributed greatly to the research.

Methods Used

This study was conducted to explore the impact of white cider consumption on the health of homeless people. Evidence for this report was largely gathered from questionnaires from drinkers and hostel workers. The sample consisted of 41 questionnaire responses from drinkers and 23 from workers from St Mungo's and Thames Reach hostels in London, from St George's Crypt and St Anne's in Leeds and from West Sussex Drug & Alcohol Action Team. A total of 31 interviews with drinkers and workers were also conducted in three of the 'wet' hostels (where residents are allowed to drink on the premises). Several liver specialists, drinks industry managers and treatment service providers also gave their views. The original intention was to also seek the views of relatives of drinkers, but because family links for this group have almost without exception been broken, we received input from just one questionnaire and interview with the sister of a man who had died from drinking white cider in 2006. She was actively seeking to prevent similar tragedies from occurring in the future.

In order to obtain a cider producers' perspective, the National Association of Cider Makers (NACM) asked its members if they would like to contribute to the research. Two companies responded, Heineken UK and Aston Manor - other cider makers may have different production practices and approaches from those presented here.

Acknowledgements

Alcohol Concern would like to acknowledge and thank the staff and service users of St Mungo's, St George's Crypt, St Anne's, West Sussex DAAT and Thames Reach who gave up their time for this research project. We would also like to extend our thanks and appreciation to the National Association of Cider Makers and to Heineken UK and Aston Manor for agreeing to be interviewed for this project.

1. Introduction

Professionals working with homeless and dependent street drinkers have expressed concern for many years that white cider, often sold cheaper than bottled water and at 7.5% abv (alcohol by volume), seems to have a particularly damaging effect on the health and behaviour of the people they work with.

There is additionally a widespread belief among drinkers, workers and the public at large that this drink has, to use a regularly quoted phrase, 'never seen an apple', and is only made from chemicals. This research project seeks to examine the evidence for this claim, and studies the impact of white cider on dependent drinkers. It examines the history, production and taxation of white cider, and considers the implications for future taxation, health and homelessness policies.

The report also examines whether white cider has a different impact on health compared to other similar drinks, and what might be an alternative drink if white cider was no longer cheaply available. It examines the production and taxation of white cider, and considers the implications for relevant policies. Brand names for popular white ciders include Frosty Jack's, White Ace, White Star, White Strike, Ice White, Diamond White, White Magic, Blackout and Three Hammers. White Lightning is still the most frequently mentioned brand whenever the matter is raised, despite the fact that Heineken stopped producing it in 2009. The report also looks at the issue of social responsibility for drinks' producers and examines the role of the Portman Group and its members in producing white ciders.

The affordability and strength of white cider also make it very attractive to under-age drinkers with considerable immediate risks, as they are able to get very drunk so cheaply. However, it is particularly difficult to assess how different drinks impact on the health of under-age drinkers, given also that it is illegal to sell alcohol to them. The impact of consumption of white cider on the health of under-age drinkers is beyond the scope of this study, but it is interesting to note that many alcohol treatment professional interviewed stated that most of the customers for white cider seem to be either dependent drinkers or children.

All major political parties in the UK have expressed a desire to tackle the problem of super-strength ciders and lagers, and the report concludes with a series of recommendations for cider producers and the government to consider.

2. Definitions and history of cider making

What is apple cider?

The word Cider is thought to derive from the Hebrew word "Shekhar" meaning strong drink, and apple trees for cider existed along the Nile River Delta as long ago as 1,300BC.

Traditional cider is made from the juice of cider apples, fermented in their own yeasts. (It can also be made from pears, but for simplicity, this study will just address apple cider.)

Mass-produced commercial cider is usually filtered, coloured, sweetened, pasteurised and force-carbonated. It has a clear golden yellow appearance rather than the cloudy amber-brown of the traditional cider.

Cider can be made from any type of apple, but traditionally the West Country - including Herefordshire, Devon and Somerset - grew 'cider' apples that are high in tannin and low in acidity. The South East - including Kent, Suffolk and Sussex - grew dessert fruit for the London market and also made cider from this fruit. Modern commercial production blends different combinations of varieties to suit different tastes. The UK is the largest worldwide producer, and has the highest per capita consumption of cider. We make about 136 million gallons a year and production has more than trebled in the past 30 years. About 45% of all the apples grown in the UK are now used for cider-making. That is around 170,000 tonnes per year, and more than two million cider apple trees have been planted since 1995.

According to the National Association of Cider Makers (NACM) 13% of adults drink cider at least once a month, compared to 49% who drink wine and 51% who drink beer. But cider sales have soared in the past six years, largely due to the marketing of the Irish cider-makers, Magners. Senior Drinks Analyst for Magners, Jonny Forsyth, said: *"Cider's success has been in constantly innovating to attract a new audience of drinkers - particularly a younger and more female crowd."*¹

What is white cider?

Almost every hostel resident and worker interviewed for this research had a total belief that white cider had never seen an apple during production, and was just produced from chemicals. Where does this belief originate? West Country poet James Crowden has been a particularly vocal critic of the drink, and states on his website:

*"White cider is made by processing dessert apples and the pomace after the traditional milling process, resulting in an almost colourless product that has been heavily filtered. Pomace is the dry apple pulp left behind when the juice has been pressed out of it and this is usually fed to animals or used for making pectin. Other large manufacturers use apple concentrate from abroad and get most of the alcohol from the addition of glucose or corn syrup. This is then fermented out to about 15% abv and then brought down with water to around 7.5% abv and sold in 2 or 3 litre bottles at prices that sometimes make lemonade seem expensive. The glucose is derived from maize or wheat starch and is changed by enzymes into sugars which in turn are changed into alcohol. So the majority of the alcohol in white cider has very little to do with apples at all."*²

Most producers would probably agree with most of this statement but would claim that there is very little difference between this process and the commercial production of any cider. They would argue, however, that pomace is not included in the manner suggested. Yeast is added for fermentation, but corn syrup is just one form of sugar used in general food manufacture, and is used in similar proportions in other ciders. The brewer from Aston Manor said *"What you can't do is ferment sugar and add a bit of apple flavouring. It wouldn't work and you couldn't class it as the drink that pays cider duty"*³

Cider production has been governed since the 1970s by Notice 162 of Customs and Excise, which was written at the time of the UK entry into the Common Market. This included a very restrictive list of permitted cider ingredients, together with; *'water no limit; sugars and sugar syrups no limit.'* This means that until recently cider could be made with minimum apple content by adding some form of sugar. Crowden claims that the Food Standards Agency reported in 2004 that juice content in commercial ciders varied from 7% to 100%.² In fact Dr Sian Thomas stated in the FSA report "it would appear that the overall juice content of ciders produced in the UK is about one-third of the product volume."³

Alcohol only acts as a preservative above 12% abv, so most ciders and wines do have a chemical preservative added, sodium metabisulphite, which is why the label says 'contains sulphites'. This has also been a long undeclared additive used by the wine industry. The only admissible colorants in cider are caramel, or three azo dyes used to achieve a light amber-to-straw colour. Interestingly there are no such restrictions on additives for that other well-known group of problem spirit drinks – RTDs (Ready to Drink) such as WKD. Some members of the cider industry feel the lack of equity is due to the lobbying muscle of the far larger companies that produce RTDs - which have an even worse reputation for encouraging excessive drinking amongst the young⁴.

It is not cost effective for producers to have a wide range of different fermentations, so they are all based around what is called their 'standard general' formula, but diluted to different strengths with colour added where necessary. White cider will simply be one of a range brewed from the same standard general.

History of white cider

White cider was first produced in the 1980s, and Diamond White was launched by Matthew Clark of Shepton Mallet in 1986. White Lightning joined the market shortly after, and was brewed by Inch's of Winkleigh. The idea was to make them very light in colour, so at first they were carbon filtered. Producers had an abundance of bittersweet apples at that time so they needed to strip out the tannin to neutralise the flavour and colour, and make a distinctive cider that was easy to drink. The culinary juice that is now used is imported in the form of concentrate and it needs no filtering as it is light in colour and low in flavour. Mansfield brewery also experimented with a very early version, made from dessert apples, and sold in a champagne bottle, but their directors judged that there was no future for such a drink.

It was drunk at first in pubs as a 275ml bottle at 7.5% abv, but then it became available in larger bottles from off-licenses for drinking at home. Bulmers bought out Inch's in the early 1990s, and their market research showed that White Lightning was popular with lower-income customers who might drink it instead of a bottle of wine on a Saturday night, along with a meal such as fish and chips. They believe that they marketed and sold the product in a responsible way at that time.

Around the year 2000 the cider industry was experiencing financial difficulties and white cider, along with all other ciders, was therefore marketed aggressively. This resulted in a considerable price reduction, and white cider quickly became the cheapest way to buy alcohol in terms of unit price. White Lightning was commonly known amongst street drinkers as 'White Frightening'. In 2003 Bulmers, with a £30m turnover, was bought by Scottish and Newcastle, a company with a 12 times bigger turnover, which was later taken over by the still larger Heineken. According to Heineken⁵, this size of organisation has far greater protection against market forces, and this can allow them to back their moral instincts with commercial actions. Heineken, at the time, considered that a responsible brewer should not

produce white ciders. However White Lightning was 10% to 20% more expensive than other ciders, so they feared that if they suddenly removed it from the market the average price would go still lower. Heineken decided instead to try and take a leadership position and change the marketplace. They realised this would be very difficult but felt that they had been involved near the start of the white cider journey, so had a duty to try and bring it to an end.

Heineken decided that they would no longer put any high-strength product over 6% abv in a three litre plastic bottle, or run promotions such as paying for two litres and getting the third litre free. They explored the possibility of banning bottles of two litres and above, but this would impact on other drinks that were not causing a problem such as champagne. Heineken deliberately put up the price of White Lightning over the next three years, which lost them three quarters of their market share. They also discussed responsible cider strategies with major retailers.

Progress had halted by 2007, as sales slumped and retailers started to drop the product. The next stand they took was to reduce the abv from 7.5% to 5.5% in May 2009, which further reduced sales. Later that year they finally de-listed what had once been the market leader, due to *"its negative 'park bench' image"* and to *"reinforce our stance on responsible drinking and drive more value into the cider market. White cider is the cheapest way to buy alcohol in the UK. This is pocket money these days. There is no other alcohol category that has the same challenge as white cider⁶."*

Heineken still had one cheap 7.5% abv cider product which was sold in a can as Strongbow Black. Perhaps because it was not considered a 'white' cider and had not been the subject of any controversy, management had failed to properly consider this product. However, in July 2010 their senior management team visited a Thames Reach hostel in London. There they were confronted by the full impact of cheap super-strength ciders and lagers on people's lives. The managing director took the decision the next day to de-list Strongbow Black.

Those who still produced white cider disagreed with Heineken's approach and an Aston Manor senior manager stated, *"White cider is no different in actual cost - we charge a fair price, or what the market price is for our product. The biggest so-called white cider is our brand Frosty Jack's, but it isn't really a white cider, it is a pale amber colour and we haven't marketed it as white cider for over two years⁴."* (As it is sold in a blue bottle, the actual colour is not obvious.) He went on to say, *"We have the same attitude as the National Association of Cider Makers, choosing to focus on problem drinkers rather than drinks. We think problem drinkers are a myth. If you take all the white ciders in the UK, it accounts for 0.1% of alcohol consumption, and is being abused by a small percentage of people. Problem drinkers are a social issue not an economic issue. If you got a consumer of 7.5% abv cider and got them onto 5% you might see an improvement in their health. You can't pick out white ciders because they're not actually the cheapest form of alcohol in the UK, the lowest strength ciders are the cheapest per unit."*

3. Cider taxation

Cider contributes more than £1m a day in excise duty and VAT to the UK Exchequer, but it is taxed at a lower rate than other alcoholic drinks in order to protect the traditional cider industry, primarily to allow for investment in the slow process of orchard development. Following the rise in alcohol tax in the 2011 budget, cider at 1.2 to 7.5% abv attracts a lower rate of duty at £35.87 per hectolitre (100 litres). Ciders at 7.5 to 8.4% abv attract the higher rate of £53.84 per hectolitre. Cider above 8.4% abv would be classed as apple wine, which would therefore pay a wine duty of £241.23 per hectolitre. Spirits Duty is calculated differently as £25.52 per litre of Pure Alcohol.

Standard Beer Duty is currently £18.57 per hectolitre for each percentage point of alcohol in the beer. A similar tax on alcohol strength in cider would achieve parity for these two drinks. The Chancellor, George Osborne, confirmed in his 2011 budget that from October 2011 tax on beers below 2.8% abv would be cut by 50% - and duty on beers above 7.5% abv would rise by an extra 25%.

This could put an extra 25p on a can of super-strength lager, but will also widen the gap between the price of super-strength lagers and ciders. This also indicates that a direct tax increase on strong ciders should also be possible, and that super strength drinks need to be considered together.

Historically the reason that cider must be below 8.4% abv is due to the fact that naturally fermented apples would not get above that level. However the addition of sugars or corn syrup to fortify the drink increases the alcohol content. Merrydown Vintage is more expensive than white cider, but is also 7.5% abv and made from dessert apples with the same base that might be used for a white cider. It used to be sold at 11% abv until the cider duty was introduced in 1984, and its strength was immediately cut, demonstrating that taxation policy can influence industry decisions on producing lower strength products.

The last Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling attempted to change tax on cider in his final budget. He proposed to remove the tax advantage that cider has by imposing a 10% rise over inflation, compared to a 2% rise for other alcoholic drinks. This would have increased the price of a pint of cider in a pub by about 20p, to about £3 a pint. This produced a media storm at the time and a huge reaction from the public and the cider industry. In any case the rise was cancelled as the general election was announced.

The day after the 2010 budget, Mr Darling said: *"There's a distinction to be made. There are some drinks sold as cider which have a very, very much higher alcoholic content, which are different from the stuff that's made in the West Country"*⁷ He was presumably referring to white ciders, but his proposal ignored that distinction by covering all ciders. He did however announce that from September 2010 *"the technical definition of cider will be changed to ensure products that more closely resemble made-wines are taxed appropriately"*.

It seems likely that Mr Darling was referring to discussions that were already taking place between the Treasury, HM Revenue & Customs and the NACM. Health and homeless charities were only included in the later stages. They concluded that the key to finding a distinction was in the juice content. Mainstream ciders are not 100% juice, but a mixture of juice and water. White ciders have a much lower juice content which is in part what allows the price to be so low. In September 2010 the Coalition Government passed the Alcoholic Liquor Duties (Definition of Cider) Order, aimed at increasing tax on cheap, strong ciders. This was introduced in Parliamentary Committee by the Secretary to the Treasury Justine Greening:

*'These products cause much concern to health and homelessness groups, which rightly identify them as cheap sources of alcohol. The cider industry, too, has shown concern because these so-called industrial ciders bear no resemblance to the traditional products consumed by reasonable drinkers. Consequently, industrial ciders should not benefit from the same rate of duty for cider that helps to support an important local and national industry.'*⁸ A minimum juice level of 35%, with a specific gravity of at least 1033 degrees was introduced, and products below that would be subject to the much higher wine rate.

The use of the term 'industrial ciders' might be rather misleading. Most of the cider that is consumed such as Strongbow and Magners has to be produced on an industrial scale, but it is not giving rise to major concerns. It remains to be seen how effective this change will be in influencing price. One of the market leaders, Frosty Jack's, already complied with the legislation on juice content at 40%. Some other ciders might be below the new standard, such as Diamond White at about 24%, but they might not need to add a great deal of extra juice to meet the threshold. Even if the production costs rose, these would not necessarily be passed on to the customer. It is extremely unlikely that any white cider would retain such a low juice level that the producers would be forced to pay the wine rate.

The UK doesn't produce sufficient sweet apples to meet the blending demands of the cider industry, which is why cider producers need to import culinary concentrate. New strains of apple are being developed locally, but it takes five years for trees to produce any significant crop, seven to eight years for the grower to break even and ten years before the trees will produce a full crop. Concentrate from Eastern Europe has historically been very cheap, but bad harvests in Poland have produced steep price rises. Producers of cheap ciders can use concentrate to avoid the capital setup costs of orchard planting and milling, and also to be able to access it throughout the year. Most of these drinks, including supermarket own brands, are on annual contracts with the producers, which are normally renewed around April when prices might change. The culmination of increased cost of concentrate, the new juice requirements and rise in VAT and alcohol duty might see some price increase around this time.

Cider production has higher production costs compared to beer, including the investment in developing orchards. This is presumably why it gets a tax break. The question has to be addressed; why should producers that use imported culinary concentrate benefit from these breaks, particularly if this might be one of the factors that keep white ciders so cheap?

White cider and price

Table 1, below, shows a random sample of different white cider products sold in differing sized containers in Maidenhead, Slough and Hayes (Middlesex) in April 2011. It also includes two super-strength lagers and one cheap brand of vodka. The 'Remainder' column is not all profit – it is simply the difference between the total tax paid and the cost to the customer. It does seem to demonstrate that relatively high margins can be maintained on white cider even at these very low prices, largely due to low cider taxation level. It is not clear how much of the mark-up would go to the producer, and how much to the retailer. It is interesting to note that although K cider at 8.4% abv falls into the higher duty bracket, this only results in an extra 1p/unit. This is 13p/unit less than lager at the moment, but this gap will grow later in the year. An 85p can of White Ace produces a similar margin to a £8.62 bottle of vodka. The retailer would need to sell two cans of Kestrel Super lager at this price to get the same mark-up as from one can of Carbon White cider.

Table 1

Product	Alcohol % abv	Size - Units (u)	Price	Price/unit £	Vat £	Duty £	Duty per Unit £	Remainder
Carbon White	7.5%	500ml - 3.75u	£0.59	0.16	0.10	0.18	0.05	£0.31
White Ace	7.5%	500ml - 3.75u	£0.85	0.23	0.14	0.18	0.05	£0.53
K Cider	8.4%	500ml - 4.2u	£0.95	0.23	0.16	0.27	0.06	£0.52
Blackout	7.5%	2L - 15 u	£2.99	0.20	0.50	0.72	0.05	£1.77
Mega White	7.5%	2L - 15 u	£2.15	0.14	0.36	0.72	0.05	£1.07
Frosty Jack's	7.5%	3L - 22.5 u	£3.49	0.16	0.58	1.08	0.05	£1.83
White Ace	7.5%	3L - 22.5 u	£3.69	0.16	0.62	1.08	0.05	£2.00
Skol Super Lager	9.0%	500ml - 4.5u	£1.25	0.28	0.21	0.84	0.19	£0.21
Kestrel Super Lager	9.0%	500ml - 4.5u	£1.20	0.27	0.20	0.84	0.19	£0.16
Selekt Vodka	37.5%	700ml - 26.25u	£8.62	0.33	1.14	6.69	0.25	£0.49

On 18 January 2011 the government published its promised plans to ban retailers from selling alcohol below the rate of duty plus VAT. It was claimed that this would reduce the sale of cheap alcohol. The rate of duty on a 440ml can of 4.2% abv lager is 33p and VAT is 5p, giving a total 'minimum price' of 38p. Minimum prices for other alcoholic drinks will include: 1 litre of vodka - £10.71, 700ml of whisky - £8.00, 750ml bottle of wine - £2.03; but because of its low duty rate - 1 litre of cider would still be sold for as little as 40p – or 5.3p per unit. Clearly this will have no impact on the prices in the table above.

Westminster Council has demonstrated the possibility of regulating sales of super-strength drinks in specific licensed premises by judicious use of licensing regulations. Their Licensing Policy contains the following: *"When requested by the police, the Licensing Authority may impose conditions that there should be no sale of alcoholic beverages over a specified limit of alcohol by volume or of specified quantities (e.g. of beers, lagers and ciders over 5.5% abv). Other conditions may be imposed directed at reducing problematic street drinking. There will be concerns over irresponsible drink promotions that do not follow best practice, that would appeal to underage drinkers or street drinkers or encourage excessive consumption."* Westminster has introduced a model condition for use when such a condition seems appropriate: *"No super-strength beer, lagers or ciders of 5.5% abv or above shall be sold at the premises"*.

This is typically requested by the police when licences are applied for by off-licences in areas where there is evidence of street drinking. There has been little or no resistance to this. Their original approach was to seek a voluntary ban in off-licences where there had been a local problem. This might have been fairly well received because many retailers do not want to encourage street-drinkers to use their premises.

Rather than restricting local authorities to take action simply on issues of public disorder, if the Licensing Act 2003 was amended to include an objective to protect public health, this would allow local authorities to take the level of alcohol-related health harm into consideration when making licensing decisions. This would give them the power to expand on the Westminster approach, and ban the sale of super-strength drinks across their locality.

4. White cider and street drinkers

Street drinking 'alcoholics' are very often marginalised by society and are largely hidden from view, out of work, struggling to find a roof and are often parted from their families. They live an existence that would be intolerable to most people, and one of the most available escape routes is through a bottle of white cider.

Of white cider drinkers completing the questionnaire in our research, around 50% claimed to drink more than three litres a day on average, and 42% (though not necessarily the same drinkers) had been drinking it for more than ten years. Of the options that were presented to them as reasons for drinking it, around 75% of drinkers and 80% of the workers supporting them rated price as the most important. This was followed by effect, then availability, with taste coming last. Only three of the drinkers rated taste as their most important attraction. It is often argued that raising prices would not change the drinking habits of this group. It was very apparent during interviews that most of them have an incredibly detailed knowledge of price variations, and will often travel considerable distances for the best bargain. They reported that some small shops were willing to give them credit if they were sure of payment when their welfare payments were received. Other shopkeepers were prepared to sell below the prices on the shelves to these very regular customers.

Some of the short-term effects of white cider that they viewed as positive, were; *“makes you happy; makes me more relaxed; mellows me out; I can function on it, makes me normal; stops me feeling sick; stops me shaking; I don't have to think about difficult personal issues; stops the withdrawals; stops the rattles; to pass the time of day and just to have a buzz; after a few bottles I can sleep and am more confident with people.”*¹¹ Several of them used it as a retreat from terrible personal experiences, including childhood sexual abuse.

Clearly drinking white cider achieves one main aim - that is to get drunk - but the descriptions provided of some of the effects of drinking white cider provides an often hidden view on the bleak lives they live; *“two litres, and above, reduces appetite, stops shaking, initially heightens emotion, more talkative, blurs vision, dulls conscience, eventually unconsciousness; wake up shaking, no appetite; sleep deprivation, takes over the day; can't sleep if I don't drink; having no energy to focus on doing daily tasks; self-neglect, social isolation; more cloudy in memory; sweats, bad dreams; it takes a lot to get drunk; doesn't help me do anything else; ill and shaky in the mornings, find it hard to eat; pain in back, really bad heartburn; makes me drunk and nauseous; tummy aches, not pleasant; makes me feel invincible, so more likely to get into fights; diarrhoea.”*¹¹ Double incontinence is a common complaint that is more likely to be mentioned by the workers we interviewed. Having constantly wet and soiled clothing leads to a great loss of dignity, and many of the residents are really in need of nursing home care.

The long-term effects that they describe include all the health conditions associated with dependent drinkers; damage to liver, heart and stomach, high blood pressure, double incontinence, fits, mental health problems, depression, blackouts and memory loss. Their own words give a greater sense of the real impact; *“Increased dependency; increased negative emotions (anger, loss of self-esteem); sick in the morning if you don't drink it; throwing up blood; bleeding veins (recent endoscopy), stomach ulcers; aching bones, loss of balance, sleep deprivation; acid reflux indigestion; high cholesterol, heart failure; find balancing difficult at times, DTs, have had seizures; weight loss, lack of appetite, poor coordination, poor diet, liver shot to bits; sick, yellow vomit every morning, sore throat (bile); exhausted every day; makes me feel terrible; suffer from panic attacks and difficulty with sleeping; keeps withdrawal away for longer; withdrawal comes quicker; stomach ulcer got very bad, nearly fatal, vomiting blood by the pint in 2009; not remembering what I did last*

week let alone last month, poor skin complexion; diabetes and heart disease, ongoing problems with my feet including toe amputation.”¹¹

Their descriptions of behavioural impacts include; *“less likely to attend appointments, poor money-management; decreased motivation skills; not going out on my own; aggressive behaviour, ASBOs, evictions pending convictions, drunk and disorderly offences; noise nuisance, complaints against me; excuse for intolerable behaviour, poor hygiene; chronic lifestyle; reduced social skills; belief that without alcohol you cannot interact properly; inhibitions go and I can become argumentative, morbid, babble inanely.”*

Their family, social or working lives have been torn to shreds; *“destroyed all of the above; my alcoholism ruined all those already over 20 years ago; ruins my life especially financially; lost all my jobs through alcohol; have lost everything due to drinking, makes you a bit of a leper; social isolation and homelessness, I don’t really see family, in hostel most of the time; I hide it from my family; most of my friends drink; the only family I see are the ones that drink; I am alienated from my extended family though I fit in well at the hostel; have limited social life or friends and can’t work now; family life fucked; fucked up everything.”¹¹*

The cheapest and most popular way to buy white cider is in two and three litre plastic bottles (often promoted as three litres for the price of two). Three litres of white cider contain 22.5 units of alcohol which is more than the maximum number of weekly units recommended by the Department of Health for a man. Hostels try to discourage sharing of drinks, but such bottles are easy to pass around groups, and in practice residents will often share when friends run out of money. However they will normally finish at least one bottle without any help at all. One worker commented, *“It’s very difficult to get an accurate measure of how much white cider some people do drink in a day because after three, three litre bottles they lose count.”¹³*

The London hostels surveyed also have some women residents, though in far smaller numbers. Several workers commented on one notable contrast. *“The main difference we see in women is that when women develop jaundice through liver disease they only seem to go into hospital once and it kills them. Men can go in a number of times before they are killed by it - probably three strikes before they are out.”¹⁵*

Roughly 25% of rough sleepers in London at the moment may be from Central and Eastern Europe. They don’t have recourse to the same welfare benefits safety net that UK residents have, unless they have worked and paid National Insurance contributions for a year. This leaves them living on the streets, and they are typically drinking vast quantities of white cider with devastating consequences. If they are drinking heavily they can’t get the work they need to be able to afford accommodation. Some agencies try to give them an alcohol detox prior to helping them get back home where they can be linked to local services. One worker described a visit he made to a group of Polish rough sleepers in a small derelict room in the East End. *‘The floor was three or four bottles deep in empty White Ace cider bottles. It was just the most horrendous sight. There is one of these rough sleepers in North London at the moment who is being paid in white cider to unload deliveries at an off-licence.’¹⁵*

There may be many white cider drinkers who do retain contact and support from their families, despite the strain of their lifestyle, but it is very difficult to track them down. The only input into this study came from the sister of a man who died from drinking White Lightning in 2006. She described his terrible spiralling decline following the death of his father. With support from family, friends and a local treatment service, he made several vain attempts to stop drinking; he could not do so due to the fits he suffered in withdrawal. His life imploded, and he was eventually hospitalised. There he allegedly received very unsympathetic treatment from one nurse in particular, which the family successfully complained about.¹⁴

This gives an interesting insight, because typical white cider drinkers might well be similarly blamed for causing their own problems during hospital treatment. Without the kind of family support described above, they would not be able to make an effective complaint, and any poor treatment or negligence would be likely to be buried with them.

Does white cider have a different health impact?

The other drink of choice for this group is super-strength lager at 9% abv, particularly in the London hostels. The research sought to investigate if the two drinks have different health or behavioural impacts. For many drinkers there appears to be little difference, but for others, and in the view of many of the workers, white cider seemed to produce far more stomach problems. Some felt it was more acidic, and as they have no appetite it seems to do more damage on an empty stomach. Several described a burning sensation as it went down. Many also say they feel sick first thing in the morning before their first drink. Some had changed to lager to avoid what they regard as this acid effect, or what was described by one person as '*a lot of physical pain*'.¹⁵

A doctor working for the British Society of Gastroenterology said:

*"I'm not aware of any reputable formal clinical research comparing the gastric toxicity of white cider and strong lager in street drinkers. I would imagine that in each case it is the combination of alcohol and absence of food that is responsible. I think that is unlikely that such a study would be fundable or would receive ethical approval in today's research climate, but would see no reason to disbelieve the subjective opinions of the subjects consulted. Strong white cider is considerably cheaper than strong lager per unit alcohol, and as a result more damaging."*¹⁶

Liver specialists and treatment services reported no discernable difference in the impact they saw from white cider. As far as they were concerned it was high strength cheap alcohol that caused the most problems. Those who work with the drinkers by and large believe that they do see a difference in health and behaviour compared to those who drink lower strength ciders. However few claim any discernable difference between super-strength drinks, apart from the increase in stomach damage from cider. Two of the hostels have harm minimisation programmes to try and move their clients onto weaker drinks. In Leeds they facilitate delivery of drinks of up to 5% abv, but if their residents want white cider, they have to go out and get it themselves. This has proved a sufficient incentive to persuade most of them to change. However for some drinkers this does not work. They talk of weaker drinks "*not touching the sides*" for them. They have become so used to the super-strength that anything weaker will just not hit the spot. A typical reaction is, "*If I had to drink 5% I'd be well fed up because I'd have to drink so much that I'd be sick before I can stop the shakes.*"¹⁵

It was interesting to note that even the Aston Manor manager quoted above is clearly aware of the health impact of these drinks when he says '*If you got a consumer of 7.5% abv cider and got them onto 5% you might see an improvement in their health.*'⁴

What would they drink instead?

If white cider was no longer available it would be very naive to believe that dependent street drinkers would stop drinking. The hope among workers interviewed is that many would change to 5% abv ciders instead. Harm minimisation practices have shown that this can work with many drinkers. Those who have developed a very strong dependence on 7.5% abv and above might be likely to steer towards super-strength lager as their next port of call if it remains relatively cheap, and any policy aimed at the damage done by white cider needs

to also include these lagers. As one ex-white cider drinker put it '*I drink lager instead now because it is less acidic, although still harmful*'.¹⁵

Cheap sherry used to be very popular with street drinkers, and this might see a resurgence of popularity. Some of the workers interviewed felt that spirits are even more damaging to health and behaviour, and it is only their relative high price that limits their street consumption. If the cheap alternatives were removed, spirits might become more attractive to some.

It is questionable whether super-strength white cider and lager have a place in a civilised society. They are wrecking lives and killing people in increasing numbers. If they were removed, the current crop of drinkers who are dependent on them would struggle to find a ready replacement. Their bodies have been conditioned to need at least 7.5% abv. Street drinking 'alcoholics' existed long before these drinks were designed, however they did not need such high strength, non-spirit drinks because they did not exist. If these drinks are allowed to remain on the shelves, then new generations of drinkers will be led down the same pathway.

5. Policy options to reduce harm

It is not surprising that this study found that 100% of those professionals who work with these drinkers believe that, because it is killing their clients - white cider should either be banned or that it should be priced out of their reach.¹² What was perhaps more surprising was that around 50% of the drinkers themselves agreed with this. It should also be stated that there were others who thought it should be made cheaper, be free or provided on prescription.¹¹ It is interesting that they should consider the latter an option as they are clearly viewing white cider in the same way as they would an illegal drug such as heroin where withdrawal from the drug is often assisted through the provision of a substitute called methadone on prescription.

In policy terms, there are several issues for government to consider:

a) There is nothing that is sufficiently different about white cider as compared to other commercial cider that gives legislators an excuse to take action against it. It is simply strong cider, albeit branded in a particular way to suggest high strength.

b) From inside the cider industry Heineken/Bulmers have chosen to de-list what had been the market's leading white cider brand because they did not believe it should be produced by responsible brewers. They apparently tried to lead their fellow producers in the same direction, but other producers are concerned about the loss of profit and believe that the issue is a social problem that cannot be solved by withdrawal of particular drinks or through variable pricing.

c) The government acted in September 2010 to introduce a 35% minimum juice content, and it remains to be seen how much prices might increase as annual contracts are re-negotiated for own label ciders. Some might need to substantially increase their juice – and therefore cost levels, but it seems unlikely that this will be a major factor for most producers.

d) The January 2011 increase in VAT combined with the government's ban on retailers selling alcohol below the rate of duty plus VAT has had very little impact on such a cheap product.

e) When a three litre plastic bottle is filled with white cider, it contains the maximum recommended number of weekly units for a man. 66% of the drinkers surveyed for this research drank at least three litres every single day. Attempts to ban three litre plastic bottles have been blocked by three arguments:

- (i) That they are safer than glass, and cannot be used as dangerous weapons.
- (ii) Some other alcoholic drinks that do not cause problems are also available in two litre plastic bottles.
- (iii) They have the advantage over cans that they are re-sealable, and so the contents do not need to be consumed in one session. This last point might be true in theory, but in practice, the dependent drinker tends to keep going until there is none left.

The drinks industry and social responsibility

If the drinks industry was to take the lead, then perhaps that could be done through the Portman Group. This group is supported by the UK's leading drinks producers to ensure their social responsibility. They say on their website that '*We are concerned solely with the social responsibility issues surrounding alcohol.*' Their Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic Drinks was introduced in 1996. They state that there is nothing in the way white cider is marketed that contravenes this code. However, one of

their members, C&C Group, is a major producer of white cider brands Diamond White, Ice Dragon, White Ace and White Star, all 7.5% abv white ciders.

It might be argued that selling three litres for the price of two of 7.5% abv cider already contravenes responsible packaging and promotion, but as representatives of producers, retail practice is beyond the scope of the Portman Group. The on- and off-trade must abide by the Mandatory Code introduced by the previous government, but there is nothing to specifically stop white cider being promoted in the way it commonly is.

In fact it would seem there is no need for any marketing of this drink to its consumers, the vast majority of which seem to be dependent drinkers and children. All the producer of white cider needs to do to attract this market is to give it a name that includes 'white', make it 7.5% abv - and of course make it cheap. Perhaps if the Portman Group is sincere in its desire '*to show leadership on best practice in the area of alcohol social responsibility*', it might consider revising its Code of Practice beyond packaging and promotion to include 'Production' and even discourage its own members from producing these drinks.

The Portman Group did however uphold a complaint in July 2008 made by the National Association of Cider Makers against the Original Cider Company for their 'Blackout' white cider and 'Mega White' cider. The company claimed that the former's name was to celebrate the eclipse of the sun. The ruling stated, '*in the context of relatively strong cider, the name Blackout carried strong connotations of the drink's potential effect on consumer: i.e., alcohol induced unconsciousness, and was therefore very unwise*'¹⁶. It also found that Mega White cider displayed the words 'Mega Strength' on their bottles. Both ciders were ruled in contravention of the Portman Group's Code and a Retailer Alert was issued for all retailers to delist the stock from their stores.¹⁶ While this ruling is positive, the power of the Portman Group and of voluntary codes has to be called into question as both these products are still on the shelves of off-licenses we visited in April 2011 (see Table 1 above).

Recommendations

All three of the main political parties have expressed strong concern about super-strength drinks, but their combined actions have brought about little change so far. Here are six recommendations developed from the evidence of this research.

1) The simplest solution would be to introduce a minimum unit price per unit of alcohol of 50p. At a stroke a three litre bottle of Frosty Jack's would jump to at least £11.50. However neither the current nor past government have pursued this measure in spite of it being strongly supported by the former Chief Medical Officer Sir Liam Donaldson, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Alcohol Health Alliance, the Campaign for Real Ale and Tesco supermarket. We would urge that this policy be re-considered.

2) At the moment the lower tax band for cider is much lower compared to beer and extremely wide, stretching from 1.2 to 7.5% abv. Those who work with heavily dependent drinkers and even some in the cider industry see a difference in health outcomes from those drinking below 5% abv.

This suggests a clear need to link cider duty to beer duty introduce a new tax band for any ciders above 5.0% abv, which needs to be at a considerably higher rate if it is to impact on the price of white ciders. The intention would be to deter production of ciders above 5% abv and provide a strong duty 'penalty' for producing ciders above this level.

3) Cider gets significant tax breaks in order to protect the traditional cider industry, due to higher production costs and to allow for investment in lengthy cider apple orchard development. We are in favour of continuing this policy. However, there seems to be no

reason why producers that use *imported* culinary concentrate should benefit from these tax breaks, particularly if this is one of the factors that keeps white ciders so cheap. This is a complicated matter as such concentrates are also used in some other industrial cider production, but HM Treasury should investigate whether the use of imported apple concentrate can be taxed differently.

4) The move to a 35% minimum juice standard has been a useful first step, but consideration should be given as to whether this is sufficiently high.

5) The large size of white cider bottles is clearly part of the problem. We would recommend a ban on cider at a greater strength than 5.0% abv being sold in any container larger than one litre.

6) The Licensing Act 2003 should be amended to include an objective to protect public health, which would allow local authorities to take the level of alcohol-related health harm into consideration when making licensing decisions, with an option to ban the sale of super-strength drinks across their locality.

7) The Portman Group should set an example by publicly supporting an end to the production of white ciders and encourage their members to cease making it.

8) Finally, government must protect alcohol services funding to ensure support and provision for street drinkers.

It is our sincere hope that for the benefit of the street drinkers we interviewed and those who may follow in their footsteps that both government and the drinks industry reconsider whether there is a place in society for the continued presence of strong cheap ciders which are solely used for the purpose of instant intoxication.

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White Cider and street drinkers

Recommendations to reduce harm

This research project seeks to examine the impact of white cider on dependent drinkers. It examines the history, production and taxation of white cider, and considers the implications for future taxation, health and homelessness policies.

