

Steep recent increases in **liver cirrhosis deaths** appear to expose the failure of British alcohol policy to curb consumption and related medical harm. The analysis by researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the National Addiction Centre found that Scotland led the way with a doubling between 1987–1991 and 1997–2001 in deaths in men and a 63% increase among women. ❶ In England and Wales, the corresponding increases were 67% and 35%. These rises were the steepest in western Europe. Across the rest of the region, on average mortality rates fell over the same period. From in the late '50s being at or near the bottom of the European cirrhosis mortality league, rates in Scotland are now among the highest in western Europe and in England and Wales have climbed to match the average.

Declines elsewhere have the researchers argued been driven mainly by falling alcohol consumption in the wine-drinking countries of southern Europe, while in the UK consumption per head has doubled over the past 40 years. "There is no doubt", said a linked editorial, that this played "a primary role" in the trend in deaths, yet UK policy has not targeted across-the-board drinking reductions and avoided measures capable of achieving such reductions. ❷ Those with the greatest research backing include the politically unpalatable options of increasing the price of alcohol through taxation and restricting its availability. ❸ ❹ Instead the British health service has focused on research on tackling "alcohol misuse" rather than drinking as such. ❺

❶ Leon D.A. *et al.* "Liver cirrhosis mortality rates in Britain from 1950 to 2002: an analysis of routine data." *Lancet*: 2006, 367, p. 52–56, and corrections in *Lancet*: 2006, 367, p. 645.

❷ Room R. "British livers and British alcohol policy." *Lancet*: 2006, 367, p. 10–11.

❸ Babor T. *et al.* *Alcohol: no ordinary commodity*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

❹ Chisholm D. *et al.* "Reducing the global burden of hazardous alcohol use: a comparative cost-effectiveness analysis." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*: 2004, 65(6), p. 782–793.

❺ Mulvihill C. *et al.* *Prevention and reduction of alcohol misuse*. Health Development Agency, 2005.