Britain has a drinking problem, and it needs help

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I last attended a Tory conference in 1994, the year John Smith's death led to me crossing the fence from journalism to politics in going to work for his successor, Tony Blair. This year I will be braving the Tory gathering again, not as journalist or political aide, but as a campaigner taking the same message I intend to take to Labour's conference, namely that Britain is not doing enough to combat the damage done to individuals, families and communities by alcohol.

There's nothing worse than a convert, and it is true that my own troubled relationship with alcohol forms much of my thinking on this issue. But there are a few facts that all of us should reflect on. Liver disease is the only major cause of death in Britain that is rising, with cirrhosis fatalities in Britain up fivefold since 1970.

The cost to the NHS of alcohol is £3.5 billion a year. Though we spend this fortune on the consequences of excessive drinking, we spend a relative pittance on the causes – £91 million on treatment, compared with £2 billion for treatment of problem drug-users. Yet there are estimated to be 1.6 million problem drinkers in England, over five times more than there are dangerous drug-users. I do not underestimate the dangers of drugs, but anyone who has sat in a courtroom knows that alcohol is the bigger problem, spilling into domestic violence, family breakdown and street disorder.

I have been studying the issue to research a novel, My Name Is, about a young girl's descent into alcoholism. I wrote as a woman, having heard liver specialist Dr Nick Sheron say that whereas once his patients were 90 per cent men, now the split is 50/50, a significant societal change. The other big change is the normalisation of alcohol at every level of society – Pimm's and champers, aperitifs at the top end, "work hard, play hard" among professional middle classes, cheap supermarket booze at home, and mums of all classes thinking they "deserve" a drink when the kids are in bed.

Pubs, with their social checks and balances, are closing at the rate of 26 per week. But that does not mean less drink: cheap deals even in petrol stations, an explosion in wine-drinking, alongside a £800 million tsunami of marketing, have seen to that.

If you watch as much football as I do, you notice trends: a booze ad, then a gambling ad, then a payday loans ad. Might there be a link between the three? When the England football team played recently, hoardings around the pitch told us that Carlsberg was “the official beer of the England team”. When Australian cricketer David Warner apologised for his boozed-up attack on England’s Joe Root in a late-night bar, was I alone in noting the irony of the beer advert on his shirt?

As a problem drinker I know you can only begin to solve the problem when you admit to it. It is the same for a problem-drinking country, which we are. In France, rugby fans watch the H Cup, not the Heineken Cup, because any linkage between sport and alcohol is banned. There is a total advertising ban in Norway, and in Sweden a ban on strong alcohol advertising. Where minimum unit pricing has been tried in British Columbia, a 10 per cent price increase led to a one-third fall in deaths attributed to alcohol. None of the awareness campaigns favoured by the industry can claim such results. Nor can Labour’s relaxation of the licensing laws, which has not led to the promised “Continental” drinking style.

David Cameron proposed following the SNP with minimum unit pricing for England. But an industry worth £37.7 billion a year was never going to let that happen without a fight, and the Government backed down.

At the party conferences I will be supporting Alcohol Concern’s call for a minimum 50p unit price, and raising levels of treatment from the current 6 per cent of dependent drinkers to 15 per cent. Small steps, but they require politicians to back them. Recently a young Greek studying at the LSE told me the story of his first Friday night here, when he asked a British student what he planned to do for the evening.

“I am going to get smashed,” said the Brit. The Greek looked confused. “How do you know?” he asked. I might suggest he joins me at the party conferences.

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