UK government announces plan to tackle alcohol

Lynn Eaton *London*

UK alcohol manufacturers could be forced to give similar health warnings on alcohol bottles to those that currently appear on cigarette packets, if plans to tackle excessive drinking, outlined in a government report, are accepted.

The report, from the Prime Minister's strategy unit, outlines a package of measures to try to curb people's drinking because of the effect of excess alcohol on people's health and the separate issue of alcohol related violence. The measures include improving the "safe drinking" message as few people know how many units they can safely drink; encouraging the drinks industry to advise on sensible consumption in advertisements and on products; and improving alcohol education in schools.

The report acknowledges, however, that similar initiatives to label products, already in place in the United States, have not led to a substantial change in people's drinking habits.

Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the report two days before the Budget, when further increases in tax on alcohol were

thought likely. It also follows a consultation on public health, issued last month (13 March, p 600).

Mr Blair said: "Millions of us enjoy drinking alcohol with few if any ill effects. Indeed, moderate drinking can bring some health benefits. But increasingly, alcohol misuse by a small minority has caused problems—crime and antisocial behaviour in town and city centres and harm to health as a result of binge and chronic drinking."

Young people under 16 are drinking twice as much as they were 10 years ago, according to the report.

Alcohol misuse is costing England up to £6.4bn (\$11.6bn; €9.4bn) in lost productivity, it says, through absence, unemployment, or premature death from excessive drinking.

The report estimates that each GP sees 364 heavy drinkers a year. Accident and emergency departments also see people who have problems associated with heavy or binge drinking. Mental health services are also likely to see people with alcohol related problems—a third of those with

mental illness have substance misuse problems, it says.

The Department of Health is to encourage doctors and other healthcare staff to identify alcohol related problems in patients.

These plans have been sharply criticised, however, by Professor Ian Gilmore, chairman of the alcohol committee of the Royal College of Physicians.

"The college has real concerns as to whether [the plans] will be translated into sufficient action on what is the second commonest cause of preventable death in this country," he said. □

The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England is available at www.strategy.gov.uk

GPs need help in spotting cancer symptoms, report says

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

GPs and the public in England need better guidance on key symptoms of cancer to aid earlier diagnosis and improve survival, says a report from the National Audit Office.

The report says that deaths from cancer in England and Wales have fallen by 12% in the past 30 years thanks to better ways of detecting cancer and improved treatments. But survival could be better if people were

diagnosed earlier, says the report.

Latest figures show that death rates for cancer in men in England and Wales are similar to rates in some European countries, such as France, Spain, and Germany, but not as low as the best performing countries in Europe, such as Sweden or the Netherlands. Rates have not fallen as much for women largely because of the uptake of smoking in the past 50 years, says the report.

The main difference in cancer care is that cancer in England tends to be diagnosed at a more advanced stage than in countries with better cancer survival figures.

The report calls for action to tackle people's reluctance to see their doctor when they have suspicious symptoms. Better guidance is also needed for GPs, who, the report says, have been good at referring the most suspicious cases but who are still missing a substantial proportion of people with cancer. This has led to delays in treatment in those patients.

The report also highlights continuing inequalities in the

prompt availability of some treatments, including approved drugs and radiotherapy, around the country. People in London and southern England continue to have better survival rates from cancer than those in the north east of England, it says.

John Bourn, head of the National Audit Office, said: "The chances of surviving cancer are improving all the time. Saving an even larger number of lives requires more of us to know and act promptly on the possible symptoms of cancer." □

Tackling Cancer in England: Saving More Lives is available at www.nao.org.uk