

Would you drink a bottle of anti-freeze? What about nail polish remover or industrial cleaning fluids? No, nor would I. As chairman of the parliamentary alcohol misuse group I am often called to comment on the availability of cheap booze; most recently this included the sale of inexpensive alcohol at a local Superdrug. This week, however, discussion on the matter took a worrying turn and concentrated on the increase of counterfeit alcohol and its potentially lethal consequences.

Seizures of counterfeit alcohol by UK trading standards authorities have increased fivefold over the past five years with much of the statistics pointing to international criminal gangs helping provide cheap drinks to meet consumer demand.

Overall alcohol consumption has decreased but those who do drink do so to more extreme levels. Unfortunately, despite the risks of death and blindness from toxic and industrial solvents in fake spirits, which are often labelled and branded to resemble well-known brands, are being sold for a fraction of the high street price.

There is a fear that the recession has led to fake drinks becoming mainstream with consumers willing to take the risk. The demand may be there for cheap alcohol, which is why it has become increasingly difficult to sell a minimum unit price to the wider public, but the only people that are benefiting from the production and sale of illicit alcohol are the criminal gangs. They don't care about the risk to human health.

There may be an argument to be had about minimum unit pricing and I am happy to defend why it wouldn't hit the responsible drinker. But there is no argument for counterfeit, potentially lethal alcohol. So if you see a bottle of vodka on sale other than in a licensed premise and you think the price is too good to be true, there is probably a reason for that and it won't be a legal one.