

Lifestyle choices and freedoms limit effectiveness of public health interventions

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The Government's ability to intervene directly to protect people's health and well-being has reached its limits in modern society because the health issues of today are closely tied in with individual lifestyle choice and freedoms, a leading academic will say today (October 5).

Public health issues have previously been more amenable to government intervention and included improving sanitation or air quality, or controlling infectious disease. But public health issues today, like smoking, drink and diet, have meant that legislation is a blunt instrument in tackling these problems.

In her inaugural lecture Professor Elizabeth Murphy, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the University of Leicester's College of Social Science will also address issues of civil liberty, individual choice and privacy in limiting the effectiveness of Government to address public health issues.

Professor Murphy will compare the relative powerlessness of governments today to affect lifestyle choices contributing to conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, with major strides forward in the 19th and 20th centuries in public health policies that helped to eradicate [infectious diseases](#) through large-scale programmes to improve sanitation, hygiene and air and water quality.

Professor Murphy will argue that many of today's problems cannot be solved by legislation – a point acknowledged by Prime Minister David

Cameron in a speech last year, when he observed that "when it comes to public health, you can't just reach for the levers of legislation ... the [public health](#) problems of today are increasingly the consequence of perfectly legal personal decisions made in private spaces."

Professor Murphy said: "I will explore how it is possible within states committed to respect for the autonomy and privacy of individuals, to promote the health and welfare of the population without riding roughshod over individual choice and freedom."

Her lecture will draw on data from a study about the choices mothers make about feeding their babies during the first two years of their lives, including whether to breast or bottle feed. She will consider how mothers endorse, negotiate, resist, reconstruct and refuse expert advice about infant nutrition.

"I shall discuss the ways in which health-related [lifestyle choices](#) have become increasingly moralised so that failure to conform to expert advice about health-promoting behaviours raises questions about one's standing as a fit and proper person," she added.

Provided by University of Leicester

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