

Should celebrities get involved in public health campaigns?

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In this week's *BMJ*, two experts debate whether celebrity involvement in public health campaigns can deliver long term benefits.

Simon Chapman, Professor of [Public Health](#) at the University of Sydney thinks the extra publicity that celebrities provide can help promote public health. He acknowledges that celebrities are not experts but says, unlike many experts, they "often speak personally and bring compelling authenticity to [public discourse](#)."

He says those concerned about celebrities in health campaigns "invariably point to examples which have gone badly wrong or which fail to change the world forever" but argues "they are silent about the many examples of [celebrity](#) engagement that have massively amplified becalmed news coverage about important neglected problems or celebrity involvement in advocacy campaigns to promote evidence based [health policy reform](#)."

Why do we expect perfect outcomes after celebrity engagement yet are realistic about the need to sustain public campaigns beyond their first burst, he asks?

He points to the case of cricketer Shane Warne who, in 1999, accepted a six figure sum to use [nicotine replacement therapy](#) to quit smoking. When photographs appeared of him smoking again, many experts "failed to exploit" the important message about the risks of relapsing, says Chapman, "instead climbing on a cynical populist bandwagon about his

alleged motives."

He also points to Kylie Minogue's [breast cancer](#), which "led to an increase in unscreened women in the target age range having mammography, but also to an increase in young women at very low risk seeking [mammograms](#) and thus being exposed to unnecessary radiation and false positive investigations."

The ambivalence about "the Kylie effect" reflects enduring debate about the wisdom of [breast screening](#), he says, "but it should not blind us to the potential value of celebrity engagement in important causes."

In contrast, Geof Rayner, Former Chair of the UK Public Health Association, and Honorary Research Fellow at City University London is worried about the insidious influences of celebrity. While celebrities might impart a short term boost to campaigns, he believes they "must tread a cautious path of support because of the risk that the celebrity becomes the story, not the campaign."

Celebrities help shift products, that much is certain, he writes, but argues that celebrity "has become mainstream marketing strategy" across society, even in politics.

He says new measures are needed to promote public health and points to campaign groups that "bring together the lobbying power of thousands of ordinary people through the internet."

Rather than relying on media stunts, modern health campaigners "need to go on the offensive against junk food, alcohol, gambling, and other often celebrity linked, commercial propaganda," he says. "At some point celebrity culture will begin to pall," he concludes. "Some celebrities might help, but let's not look for saviours, buoyed by the happy thought that the work is done when a celebrity is involved. That's a lie too."

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