

Can nudging help fight the obesity epidemic?

15 April 2011

With obesity rates soaring, the government has been promoting nudge - a strategy that does not tell people how to live but encourages them to make healthy choices in respect of diet and exercise.

Experts in the British Medical Journal this week go head to head over whether nudge is an effective way to tackle obesity.

Professor Tim Lang and Dr Geof Rayner, both from the Centre for Food Policy at City University in London, say that nudge is not new and that it is "a smokescreen for, at best, inaction and, at worst, publicly endorsed marketing."

They argue that the nudging strategy portrays governments in a soft light and allows them to shy away from taking tough action that can be unpopular - for example introducing more regulation, higher taxes and legislation that restricts or bans unhealthy habits.

The responsibility deals with industry that were formalised in the 2010 public health white paper add further concern to the use of nudging, they say.

Finally, they also worry that nudge "becomes collusion between the state and corporations to hoodwink consumers."

But Dr Adam Oliver from the London School of Economics and Political Science in London, argues that there is a lot of ignorance about what nudge actually means. He says that nudge should not be seen as a replacement for stricter forms of food regulation but rather as "an additional tool to complement regulation by moving society incrementally in a direction that might benefit all of us."

Oliver says that, while nudging is at an initial development stage and that little evaluation has

taken place, "the beauty in the approach in that almost everyone can think up and pilot financially costless initiatives in their households or workplaces."

He concludes that, "in tackling [obesity](#), the nudge approach will be no substitute for regulation of the food and drinks industry, but it may nonetheless serve the social good."

Provided by British Medical Journal

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