Is nudge an effective public health strategy to tackle obesity?

Adam Oliver maintains that nudges may help people to make healthier choices, but Geof Rayner and Tim Lang worry that government proposals are little more than publicly endorsed marketing.

The “nudge” or, more formally, libertarian paternalist agenda has captured the imagination of at least some of the British policy elite, epitomised by the creation of the Cabinet Office’s behavioural insights team (the so called nudge unit). The reason for the political popularity of nudging is obvious: it offers politicians a tool by which they can offer guidance, without enforcement, on individual behaviour change that is good for and, on reflection, preferred by, individuals themselves. Various nudge policies have been proposed to tackle obesity, but before considering these, I will try to clear up a few misconceptions about what libertarian paternalism conceptually entails.

Rationale of nudging
The essence of the approach is to apply behavioural economic insights (for example, loss aversion—that losses tend to “hurt” more than gains of the same size) to policy considerations so as to change the choice architecture (that is, the environment). In the case of obesity, people with a tendency to overweight may place too much emphasis on immediate pleasures at the expense of future harms. In theory, changing the environment will make people more likely to make voluntary decisions that they would like to make and yet ordinarily fail to do so.

No behavioural economist that I know would argue that nudges should entirely replace, for example, stricter forms of food legislation. Rather, nudges should be seen as an additional tool to complement regulation by moving society incrementally in a direction that might benefit all of us. Nudging should be seen as a “nuanced” approach—some policies might prove effective, and some might not; moreover, some of the

Commercial benefit
Richard Thaler, the Chicago economist and coauthor of Nudge, has argued that more regulation won’t solve the problems created by Wall Street; only better information will.
effective policies may be judged politically or ethically unacceptable.

**Nudges for obesity**
The government’s nudge unit recently released a report that, among other policy proposals, listed several interventions aimed at encouraging healthier eating and exercise. Financial and non-financial incentives—that is, rewarding people if they meet a voluntarily agreed target behaviour or outcome—are mooted throughout the report. Unfortunately, simple incentives have not proved effective in motivating sustained weight loss, but the report suggests modifying the incentive according to behavioural economic principles in the hope that this will improve their effectiveness. For instance, by appealing to loss aversion, the incentive could take the form of a “deposit contract,” whereby people offer up their own money at the start of the intervention and receive the money back only if they achieve their target. Alternatively, given that people tend to give too much weight to small probabilities, the incentive could take the form of a very small chance of winning a large amount of money. Kevin Volpp and colleagues have started to test such mechanisms in the context of weight loss, so far with limited success, but there is far more scope for further experimentation of this kind.

A further behavioural economic finding, “hyperbolic discounting”—that is, that people place a heavy emphasis on immediate pleasures and pains—may also be usefully considered when designing policy. For many, exercising and eating healthily do not confer as much immediate pleasure as doing the alternative; the obesity recommendations in the nudge unit’s report propose a range of interventions intended to make these activities more enjoyable. These include a partnership with LazyTown, an initiative linked to a children’s television programme that has been operating in Iceland since 1996. Young children sign an “energy contract” with their parents that rewards them for eating healthily and being active. After introduction of LazyTown, childhood levels of obesity in Iceland started to fall. The nudge unit also raises the possibility of embedding musical sensors in stairs to encourage people to avoid lifts, which an experiment in Stockholm suggests could work.

Most of the work in this area is at the ideas stage: little evaluative work has been done. That is because the field is new and developing. The beauty in the approach is that almost everyone can think up and pilot financially costless initiatives in their households or workplaces. For instance, marginally altering the salience of healthy foods may increase their consumption—a friend of mine has observed that the consumption of apples in her workplace increases noticeably when the apples are slipped and offered to her coworkers, rather than left whole in the fruit bowl.

Of course, 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.

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**Provenance and peer review:** Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Cite this as: BMJ 2011;342:d2168

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**Nudge pitches government action at the soft end of policy interventions rather than the hard end where taxes, regulations, or bans feature**

complex, raising issues of habit formation, power, genetic vulnerability, individual and group behaviours, let alone the legacy of decades of marketing power and pricing messages. How can “nudge” reshape the agri-food business’s long commitment to lower the price of fat, soft drinks, or high calorie readymade foods or the ubiquitous “offer” of food at every newsagent, station platform, and petrol station?

The responsibility deals with industry that were formalised in the 2010 public health white paper add further concern to the use of nudging. Although Mr Lansley, the secretary of state for health, recently claimed the deals don’t “put industry in the driving seat,” the first of the three “pillars” in the deal is, “To enable, encourage and incentivise consumers to adopt a better diet and to increase their levels of physical activity as part of a positive decision to lead a healthier lifestyle.” Nevertheless, it seems that, at least in relation to the alcohol industry, questions of pricing or irresponsible marketing fall outside the permitted areas of discussion. Our final worry is that nudge becomes collusion between the state and corporations to hoodwink consumers. At least nannies are overt.

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**Provenance and peer review:** Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Cite this as: BMJ 2011;342:d2177

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