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**PUBLIC
HEALTH**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“THE GOVERNMENT
SHOULD TAKE
TOUGHER ACTION
ON UNHEALTHY
BEHAVIOUR”**

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KEY TERMS

Nudge

Paternalism

Personal autonomy

Public health

INTRODUCTION

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In recent years governments have all sought to improve public health; whether by advertising, campaigns or targeted programmes. In recent years, the governmental approach to public health policy has drawn strong influence from Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s highly influential book *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*. However, some have started to question whether ‘soft’ approaches such as nudge are enough to change behaviour, and a recent House of Lords report [Ref: [Parliament](#)] has suggested that the public simply do not respond as positively to nudge as they do to more direct intervention. This has also been reflected in the public health policy being adopted or proposed by government; with increasingly interventionist policies being suggested or implemented. Central to this debate are several questions: are we capable of making our own healthy (or unhealthy) decisions, or could we do with a push in the right direction? Or, should the government go further than that to ensure that we don’t all drink, smoke and eat ourselves to death? With average life expectancy rising year-on-year, how should we weigh the government’s concern for our health against concerns about the erosion of individual autonomy?



The health of the nation: how healthy are we?

According to the latest national statistics, though life expectancy is steadily increasing, many in the UK will face major health problems during their lives due to a marked increase in ‘lifestyle diseases’ – illnesses and conditions related to the way we live our lives. ‘Lifestyle diseases’ include illnesses such as smoking-related cancers and lung and heart disease caused by obesity. Aside from the impact on personal health, the cost to the public purse is significant; with the NHS paying out billions of pounds a year on treatments. Recently researchers have warned that obesity rates could rise in the UK to 40% by 2030 and one researcher lamented that the government is ‘enfeebled by their ideology’ and too worried about accusations of the nanny state [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

Living longer

On the other hand, given the startling statistical prediction, made by the ONS this August, that one in three girls and one in four boys born this year will live to 100 years of age, are we in danger of getting concerns about our health out of perspective [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? Did the novelist Kingsley Amis have a point when he famously quipped that ‘No pleasure is worth giving up for the sake of two more years in a geriatric home at Weston-super-Mare’? Others have variously criticised the exaggeration of problems like obesity [Ref: [Straight Statistics](#)]; the endless streams of conflicting dietary advice promoting confusion and anxiety [Ref: [Social Issues Research Centre](#)]; and the lack of meaningful context provided when newly discovered risks – such as eating too much bacon – are publicised [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

How free should we be to make unhealthy choices?

Governments throughout the ages have sought to improve public health, and no wonder; a healthier society is a more productive one and the less people get ill, the less they need looking after! Many argue that when it comes to public health the government have a duty to protect us. As public health affects us all, it is in our interests to allow the government to involve itself closely with it. Increasingly governments look to a range of policy measures to change our behaviour such as: outright bans, like the ban on smoking in confined public spaces; or hard-hitting and graphic public health campaigns [Ref: [NHS Birmingham East & North](#)]; or ‘nudge’ type policies that alter environmental cues (the positioning of lifts in buildings, for example) to prompt healthier behaviour [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But others are worried about the implications of inviting the state into our lives in this way, and argue that it is none of the government’s business how much we all eat or smoke, or how badly we treat ourselves. As autonomous individuals we are quite within our rights to behave unhealthily if we so desire. Those raising such concerns emphasise that a truly healthy society requires individuals to ‘take charge of their own destinies’ and warn that the state is wrongly encouraging people to hand over personal responsibility for their lives to the government [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)].

Prevention is better than cure?

A key plank of the case for the government taking stronger actions to discourage unhealthy behaviours is the simple premise that prevention is better than cure. However, not all are equally convinced by this argument. Dr Iona Heath, President of the Royal College of General Practitioners, has



DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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argued, writing in a personal capacity, that an unaffordable obsession with preventing illness was diverting crucial resources away from front-line treatment [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Meanwhile, restrictions on treatment for smokers and obese patients have stoked controversy amongst doctors [Ref: [Pulse](#)], whilst others have critiqued public health campaigns for patronising ordinary people and representing an attack on the 'pleasures of working-class life' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, those lobbying for the government to do more counter that disadvantaged communities suffer the worst affects of ill health, experience lower average life expectancies and therefore need to be targeted [Ref: [BMJ](#)]. Others point out the powerful impact of advertising by the food and drink industry on people's behaviour to underline the need for strong government action to both curb the excesses of industry and to promote healthy lifestyle choices [Ref: [Marketing Week](#)]. Is it time to call for tougher government action, even if intrusive, or to tell the government to butt out and respect individual autonomy?



ESSENTIAL READING

'Forget nudging, the public health strategy doesn't work'

Mark Radcliffe *Nursing Times* 27 July 2011

'Nudge' is not enough, it's true. But we already knew that

Jonathan Rowson *Guardian* 19 July 2011

Yes, smoking kills – but not everyone wants to be saved

Tanya Gold *Guardian* 31 May 2011

FOR

Tough action needed for better public health

Denis Campbell *Guardian* 19 July 2011

Why a nudge is not enough to change behaviour

Baroness Julia Neuberger *BBC News* 19 July 2011

Smoking ban is needed to protect children

Alex Cunningham *Politics.co.uk* 26 June 2011

Popularity should not dictate public health policy

Dianne Abbott *Guardian* 11 March 2011

Don't take offence if we lecture you on how to stay alive and healthy

Steve Field *Observer* 8 August 2010

AGAINST

The Nanny State's edicts on alcohol are enough to turn us to drink

Dr Martin Scurr *Daily Mail* 26 July 2011

Why eating right doesn't matter

Julie Burchill *MyDaily* 15 July 2011

A White Paper won't stop my mum smoking

Philip Collins *The Times* 3 December 2010

Public health and the obsession with behaviour

Dr Michael Fitzpatrick *spiked* 5 May 2010

'Choose the yum and risk the yuk?'

David Spiegelhalter *BBC News* 6 May 2009

IN DEPTH

Should the growing weight of nation be put in government's hands?

Monica Eng *Chicago Tribune* 28 July 2011

Should smoking in cars be banned?

Vivienne Nathanson and Simon Clark *The Times* 8 July 2011

Is smoking still defensible?

Nick Duerden *Independent* 4 July 2011

How the war on obesity went pear-shaped

Basham and Luik *spiked* 15 March 2011

Healthism is a vile habit: It is no longer enough simply to be well...

Brian Appleyard *Independent* 21 September 1994

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BACKGROUNDERS

Behaviour Change

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence July 2011

House of Lords Behavioural Change Report

Parliament July 2011

A snapshot of thoughts on nudge theory

Karen Bollan *Guardian* 4 February 2011

Sugaring the pill

BBC Radio 4 27 October 2010

Healthy lives, healthy people : our strategy for public health in England

Department of Health 2010

Michael Marmot speech

Fair Society Healthy Lives 12 February 2010

A liberal dose? Health and wellbeing: the role of the state

Richard Reeves *Department of Health* 1 February 2010

Using financial incentives to achieve healthy behaviour

Theresa M Marteau et al *BMJ* 2009

Fattened statistics

Peter Marsh *Social Issues Research Centre* 24 April 2006

The Effectiveness of Interventions to change Health-Related Behaviours

Ruth Jepson *MRC Social & Public Health Sciences Unit* May 2000

Smoking on the silver screen

Economic and Social Research Council

Health systems and health-related behaviour change: a review of primary and secondary evidence

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

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FILMCLUB

RECOMMENDS:

'Super Size Me' (12), 2004

'Thank You For Smoking' (15), 2005

Find out [more](#) about our partnership with the education charity FILMCLUB, how you can bring the power of films into your school debates, and this autumn's recommendations from the FILMCLUB team for Debating Matters!

ORGANISATIONS

[Behavioural Insights Team](#)

[Centre for Evidence Based Public Health Policy](#)

[Free Society](#)

[Health England](#)

[Kings Fund](#)

[MRC National Prevention Research Initiative](#)

[MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit](#)

[National Obesity Forum](#)

[Office for National Statistics](#)



IN THE NEWS

Global governments 'must get tough on obesity'

BBC News 26 August 2011

Calorie counts on menus 'prompt healthy choices'

BBC News 27 July 2011

Cheers... an extra glass of wine is fine as the daily allowance could be raised

Daily Mail 26 July 2011

Healthier behaviour plans are nudge in the wrong direction, say peers

Guardian 19 July 2011

GPs agree ban on operations for smokers and obese patients

Pulse 19 July 2011

Wales car smoke child protection considered

BBC News 13 July 2011

Babies 'must exercise regularly' to fight obesity

Telegraph 10 July 2011

MPs campaign to relax smoking ban in pubs

BBC News 29 June 2011

Fast-food outlets count the calories in new health drive

The Times 19 February 2011

'Nudging' may help but we need concrete action too, say doctors

BMA 30 November 2010

NHS explores paying people to become healthier

BBC News 19 May 2010

NHS 'wasting millions on worried well', top GP warns

Telegraph 8 March 2010

NHS 'wasting millions on treating the worried well'

Daily Mail 8 March 2010

Anti-obesity ad shocks New Yorkers

BBC News 7 October 2009

Dealing with the worried well

BBC News 19 September 2007

We're facing a public health crisis, say Tories

Telegraph 17 March 2007

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ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.



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Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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Professional role
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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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