

Response to UK Government White Paper on Public Health entitled “Healthy Lives, Healthy People”

(tinyurl.com/2011phwp)

This White Paper is commendable in its aspirations, but puts too great a reliance on what individuals, industry and local communities can realistically do to achieve substantial improvements in public health in the absence of specific Government action.

The general approach is delegation of responsibility. However without the necessary powers devolved at a local level, and without leadership at a national level, this responsibility will be diffused and is unlikely to achieve the necessary outcome.

The recommendations for public education and partnerships with industry are sensible but more is needed. The voluntary salt reduction programme, with guidance at national level, has resulted in a useful, but still too small, 10% decrease in salt intake. Instead, there needs to be a national regulatory or taxation policy (such as that applied to tobacco), a ban on transfatty acids, calorie labelling on menus in chain restaurants, and an excise tax on specified constituents of ready-to-consume food and beverages to discourage their use in processed foods (levied on salt, alcohol, saturated fat, and sugar, the amounts of which are already shown on the packaging). “Nudging” individuals into adopting healthier practices and industry into providing healthier foods and beverages is helpful but not enough. It is a weak instrument of public policy bearing in mind that commercial and public health interests are often not aligned. More is needed than simple encouragement. The objective should be to create a regulatory and excise tax framework that aligns the promotion of business and public health.

The scale of avoidable health problems has reached a critical level, with the UK having the highest obesity rates in Europe. Cardiovascular disease, obstructive lung disease and lung cancer, and diabetes with its serious complications of blindness and renal failure, are largely avoidable. Together they represent a very large health and economic cost. Public health policy needs to be proportionate to the size of the problem. The proposal to set up a unified health authority (Public Health England) is welcomed, but it should have regulatory powers and the means to influence a public health driven food taxation policy, analogous to the Bank of England setting the interest rate to control inflation.

In the USA, individual states and cities have powers to introduce local regulations and specific taxes. In Britain, if responsibilities on public health are to be delegated to local level, local authorities would need to be given the necessary regulatory and taxation powers to implement their decisions. Otherwise they will just be voices of opinion instead of effective public health agencies.

Personal choice in promoting health is appropriate when individuals have a practical choice. But it needs to be recognised that a public health policy that relies on personal choice can have only a limited effect because there may be little opportunity for individuals to exercise the necessary choices. For example, individuals have little control over their living conditions, design of public highways (prevention of road traffic accidents), and the composition of manufactured foods (most salt is hidden, only 20% of a person’s intake is used in cooking or added at meals). Unhealthy foods tend to be cheaper than healthier foods, disadvantaging the poorer members of society, and “low fat” versions often have a high sugar and salt content.

Consideration should be given to revising the White Paper to give the proposed “Public Health England” a unified structure and budget, with a proactive Director who would provide the necessary leadership to implement public health policies throughout the country. This should be based on education, partnerships and, within set limits, the authority to set food excise taxes that would be varied according to their efficacy in reducing the average consumption of salt, alcohol, sugar and saturated fat in processed foods and drinks.

We urge the Government to strengthen its approach and adopt a bolder, more proactive approach to public health. This could prevent tens of thousands of people dying or becoming disabled every year.

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14th February 2011