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**UNHEALTHY
LIFESTYLES**

**ROB LYONS &
ANWAR ODURO-
KWARTENG**



DEBATING MATTERS
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INTRODUCTION

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Over the past few decades, it could be argued that governments have regulated more and more to help us make healthy choices in our lives. In the UK, according to some estimates; 67% of men, and 57% of women are either overweight or obese, making us one of the fattest nations in Europe [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Supporters of intervention argue that this is one of the reasons why it is necessary for the government to act to tackle unhealthy lifestyles, with some suggesting that in the long run, the next generation may actually have shorter life expectancies than their parents, because of lifestyle related illnesses [Ref: [Independent](#)]. They assert that those who pursue unhealthy lifestyles also affect others around them, whether directly - through 'second-hand' smoke, or alcohol-related crime - or indirectly through increases in healthcare costs; with Type 2 diabetes said to cost the taxpayer £9bn per year to treat in the UK [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. On the other hand, critics put forward the notion of individual choice when it comes to lifestyle preferences. They argue that we should be free to make our own decisions about lifestyle and health, even if others see them as 'bad' choices [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. We cease to be free, they suggest, if the government can manipulate how we live our lives, either through outright bans, "sin taxes" or other restrictions, with one commentator warning that: "You're more akin to an ape than a man" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] when the government steps in to regulate your lifestyle choices. Is it right that government plays a role in our lifestyle choices, and does it have a responsibility to do so? Or should we be left to our own devices to pursue whatever lifestyle we choose?



The rise of the new public health

Attempts to regulate our bad habits are not new. For instance, in America, the consumption of alcohol was completely banned during the Prohibition era of the 1920s and 1930s [Ref: [About.Com](#)]. The more modern trend of regulation however, started with tobacco. In 1954, two British researchers, Austin Bradford Hill and Richard Doll, reported a strong link between smoking and lung cancer [Ref: [British Medical Journal](#)]. A major conference in 1978 produced the Alma Ata Declaration, which argued that health was a right, and that: “Governments have a responsibility for the health of their people which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures” [Ref: [Pan American Health Organization](#)]. As a result, smoking became a public health issue, and over the years, more and more legislation has been passed in order to reduce levels of smoking, culminating in the ban of smoking in public places in the UK in 2007 [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Views on the rise of public health differ greatly. With advocates of increased intervention suggesting that because education and persuasion alone are not enough, government action is also needed to alter unhealthy lifestyle habits, by reducing our exposure to certain products such as trans fats [Ref: [The Times](#)]. For them: “Public health is the role of government, and diet is right up there with any other public responsibility you can name” [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Critics of this approach bemoan the fact that government intervention suggests an inability on the part of the individual to exercise their own will, and instead, need the government to do it for them [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

The case for regulation

Advocates say the ban on smoking in public places in the UK is an example of the good that government intervention can do. They cite evidence that suggests that by 2012, there were 1200 less hospital admissions per year in the UK due to heart attack - a key health risk for smokers [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Supporters also note that Smoking rates have declined markedly as a result of legislation: in 1974, 51 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women smoked; by 2012, just 20 per cent of adults in the UK smoked [Ref: [ASH](#)]. In a further attempt to cut smoking related deaths, and deter the young from smoking, there are suggestions that the UK should ban anyone born after the year 2000 from ever being permitted to buy cigarettes [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. But this kind of prohibition seldom works, others assert, noting that the smoking ban in Ireland appears to have had little effect on smoking rates among the population there [Ref: [Irish Independent](#)]. Furthermore, in response to calls for smoking in cars with children on board to be banned, critics warn that: “This prohibition (outlawing smoking in cars) would control the behaviour of free non criminal adults in their own private space, and is the first step in a process that is likely to make our homes the legitimate jurisdiction of politicians” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, commentator Muriel Gray dismisses these concerns, stating that: “Legislation is sometimes simply a benchmark of decency. We declare, through law, that something is not acceptable and potentially actionable... That is the mark of civilised society and successful communal living.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)].



Government intervention is also necessary to tackle unhealthy diets some say, with rates of certain cancers, and even diseases of centuries past such as gout on the rise due to poor diet, and over consumption of sugars, fats and alcohol [Ref: [Express](#)]. For them, the solution is legislation, with a sugar tax being mooted in the UK as a way of regulating what we eat, and protecting children from excess sugar consumption [Ref: [Independent](#)]. The UK is not alone; across Europe, countries such as France have introduced a levy on fat [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)] in an attempt to address growing obesity problems. But critics point to the failure of a so called ‘fat tax’ in Denmark, which was the first country to implement such as measure, but was forced to rescind the law a year later due to its effect on the economy, and because it failed to alter consumer behaviour [Ref: [Economist](#)]. On principle, these commentators claim that what individuals choose to eat should be their decision alone. Although this view is questioned on a practical level by those who say that government must step in, because healthcare is not free, and long term, the NHS cannot cope with treating those with lifestyle related illnesses [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Personal choice and individual responsibility?

Author G.K Chesterton wrote: “The free man owns himself. He can damage himself with either eating or drinking; he can ruin himself with gambling. If he does, he is certainly a damn fool, and he might possibly be a damned soul; but if not, he is not a free man any more than a dog” [Ref: [Chesterton.org](#)]. From this position, the government has no place in legislating to get us to adjust our diet and lifestyle; how we choose to live our lives

is our decision alone, because: “ When the government gets involved in taxing this or prohibiting that, it removes another small plank from the concept of personal responsibility” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Others suggest that this individualistic view of society is unhelpful, with one observer noting that: “We want the state to take our side and, when necessary to stop us smoking, drinking, and eating ourselves into an early grave” [Ref: [Herald Scotland](#)]. When seen in this light, government intervention in our lifestyles is benevolent and for our own good, rather than malevolent and controlling.

Opponents though suggest this view of government interference amounts to nothing more than a “nanny state”. Instead, they argue that: “Adults should enjoy the right to eat and drink what they wish, and the corresponding responsibility to enjoy or suffer the consequences” [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. In contrast, columnist Minette Marrin disagrees, and responds by saying that: “ You cannot have a welfare state without having a nanny state to some degree...we are all closely involved with one another’s health, including everyone’s eating and drinking” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. But even if we agree with concerns over the nanny state, can the same principle of personal responsibility apply to children? Supporters of government intervention think not. Amid evidence of an obesity problem among children, and calls for a sugar tax [Ref: [Independent](#)], as well as a ban on smoking in cars with children on board, some feel that government intervention is the right thing to do in order to protect the young [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. So, should the state have a decisive role in our lifestyle choices? Or is lifestyle the domain of the private individual, who should be free to make unhealthy decisions if they wish to do so, without state interference?



The Nanny State's biggest test

Economist 15 December 2012

Are you responsible for your own weight? For and against

Radley Balko et al *Sampfnu*

FOR

I won't be giving up sugar, and that's my responsibility

Matthew Sayer *The Times* 6 March 2014

Next they'll be regulating our trousers

Mark Wallace *Guardian* 10 January 2014

It's not the Government's role to give you willpower

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 4 July 2012

The Michael Bloomberg nanny state: a cautionary tale

Karen Harned *Forbes* 5 May 2012

AGAINST

The new front line: obesity

Phil Whittaker *New Statesman* 17 April 2014

I give the nanny state three cheers

Jock Morrison *Herald Scotland* 8 April 2014

Laws to curb junk food are societal housekeeping

Muriel Gray *Guardian* 30 May 2013

Fat and sugar are just as deadly as cigarettes

Camilla Cavendish *The Times* 3 January 2013

IN DEPTH

The facts about obesity: 10 facts you need to know

Sarah Boseley *Guardian* 24 June 2014

The big fat lie about cholesterol

James Delingpole *Spectator* 21 June 2014

Weaning the world of its sweet tooth

Financial Times 29 April 2014

Sugar: Drastic measures

Scheherazade Daneshkhu *Financial Times* 25 April 2014

Mortality in relation to smoking

British Medical Journal 24 June 2004



In the 19th Century it was clean water: now its unhealthy lifestyles

Sally Davies *Guardian* 22 July 2014

Doctors cant stop us being obese: its up to us

Phil Hammond *The Times* 29 May 2014

Smoke without fire

The Times 21 May 2014

Forget all that you have been told about unhealthy foods

Joanna Blythman *Guardian* 23 March 2014

America's war on obesity is an assault on our liberty

Christopher Caldwell *Financial Times* 7 March 2014

Smoking in cars: we must ban it to protect children

Luciana Berger *Guardian* 5 February 2014

Banning smoking in cars: an authoritarian step too far

Charlotte Gore *Guardian* 30 January 2014

Passive smoking: another of the nanny state's big lies

James Delingpole *Telegraph* 18 December 2013

Britain has gone from nanny state to naggy state

Phillip Johnston *Telegraph* 15 July 2013

Ban fizzy drinks

Minette Marrin *The Times* 3 March 2013

We are eating our way to disaster

Peter Foster *Telegraph* 11 January 2013

Danish Fat taxes

Economist 17 November 2012

The dangerous synergy between nanny state and universal healthcare

Paul Hsieh *Forbes* 18 June 2012

The wages of sin taxes

Adam Smith Institute 14 May 2012

Should we regulate sugar like tobacco?

Art Carden *Forbes* 2 February 2012

Unhealthy foods: ban them and subsidize vegetables

Mark Bittman *New York Times* 23 July 2011

John Stuart Mill's moral and political philosophy

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

G.K Chesterton

G.K Chesterton.org

ORGANISATIONS

British Medical Journal

Pan American Health Organisation



Belly fat clearest sign of Type 2 Diabetes

Guardian 31 July 2014

Calls to introduce a sugar tax to curb childhood obesity

Independent 22 June 2014

No sugar tax says Jeremy Hunt

Telegraph 21 June 2014

Britain among worst in Europe for obese and overweight people

Guardian 19 May 2014

Fewer than 1 in 5 are now smokers

Daily Mail 12 May 2014

Labour plans crackdown on unhealthy eating, smoking and drinking

Telegraph 4 May 2014

Diabetes treatment will bankrupt the NHS in a generation

Guardian 25 April 2014

Doctors call for ban on cigarettes to those born after the year 2000

Daily Mail 26 March 2014

Sugar tax might be necessary

BBC News 5 March 2014

Britain gout capital of Europe due to unhealthy lifestyles

Express 16 January 2014

NHS must treat unhealthy diseases, not killer illnesses

Telegraph 15 October 2013

Unhealthy lifestyles will see children die before parents

Independent 12 August 2013

NHS should charge for lifestyle related illness

Huffington Post 27 November 2012

What the world can learn from Denmark's failed fat tax

Washington Post 11 November 2012

Smoking ban has reduced asthma and heart attacks

Guardian 29 June 2012

France approves sugar tax

Daily Mail 29 December 2011

Unhealthy lifestyles to blame for nearly half of all cancers

Telegraph 7 December 2011

Denmark introduces fat tax to curb obesity

Independent 3 October 2011

England smoking ban to begin July 1

BBC News 1 December 2006



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