

# The 'Fat Tax'

## Thomas Kluyver

At an estimated cost of £500 million per year, health problems from obesity do not just affect individuals but strain our resources and healthcare system (1). A 'fat tax' levied on unhealthy foods could give people an appealing incentive to eat healthily. This might also go along with a reduction in taxes for healthy foods—for example, Innocent Drinks are petitioning the government to reduce the VAT rate on smoothies, to encourage the population to get their five portions of fruit and veg per day (2). But is this a good way to tackle this problem?

An obvious downside to introducing such a 'fat tax' is that it represents government interference in our personal lives. It should be up to us to decide what we eat, rather than a 'nanny state' telling us to eat our greens. There are also concerns that the effects on people's diet may be negligible, or even unpredictable (3). For instance, if people eat carrot sticks and creamy dip together, taxing the dip might also affect the healthy consumption of carrots.

On the other hand, the current system is far from perfect. Cheap unhealthy food encourages people to eat badly, but the long term cost to taxpayers is one which everyone picks up, regardless of their eating habits (1).

An alternative would be to deny free healthcare to those who have consciously chosen to damage their health, such as smokers and the clinically obese. This may sound extreme, but there were reports of such an idea being discussed in Cabinet a couple of years ago (4). This approach runs in to some serious problems; not least that many people will not think about the consequences of their actions decades ahead, so it could punish rather than persuade. It also ignores questions about our free will—social factors and our genes can influence the decisions or even how we react to our environment, making it over-simplistic to suggest that

obesity is solely a person's own responsibility (5,6).

Against this background, the 'fat tax' seems like a good idea. Crucially, it provides an incentive at the point where people make the choice to eat fatty foods, not years down the road if they suffer health problems as a result. In this way it could influence people's choices without punishing them. Even if it has little effect on people's choices, it would offset the cost to the country of treating the conditions resulting from obesity. The tax on tobacco, in a similar vein, already brings in some £8 billion each year, several times what smoking costs the NHS (7,8). And after all, by having nationalised healthcare, we have mandated our government to help keep us healthy, a target which must inevitably involve influencing our personal lives.

*Thomas Kluyver is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year reading Biological Natural Sciences at Peterhouse. He is currently Editor-in-Chief for The Triple Helix, Cambridge.*

### References:

1. National Audit Office **2001** [www.nao.org.uk/pn/00-01/0001220.htm](http://www.nao.org.uk/pn/00-01/0001220.htm)
2. Innocent Drinks, [www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/our\\_drinks/petition/](http://www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/our_drinks/petition/)
3. Frazao, E. et al. *J. Nutr.* **2003**, 133, 844S–847S.
4. The Independent **2006** [www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/obese-may-be-denied-priority-nhs-care-429844.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/obese-may-be-denied-priority-nhs-care-429844.html)
5. Christakis, N.A. et al. *New Engl. J. Med.* **2007**, 357, 370–379.
6. Bray, G. et al. *FASEB J.* **1997**, 11, 937–945.
7. HMRC **2007** [www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/tax\\_receipts/table1-2.pdf](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/tax_receipts/table1-2.pdf)
8. *Smoking Kills—A white paper on tobacco* **1998** [www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm41/4177/4177.htm](http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm41/4177/4177.htm)

