A nudge in the wrong direction: the limitations of the UK government’s approach to public health

Chris Bonell

Professor of Sociology and Social Intervention
University of Oxford
What is a nudge?
“Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness” by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein
Nudging

- Everyday decisions often not conscious or rational – automatic, follow perceived norms, rely on poor information

- “Libertarian paternalism” – influence people’s behaviour but not coercively
Nudges – examples

- Opting out of rather than into health screening

- Increase profile of healthy choices in supermarkets

“Choice architecture”: framing of options or imposition of ‘trivial’ costs
Policy interest

- Sunstein advising Obama on regulation
- Thaler input to Behavioural Insight Team, also 2010 PH strategy and Responsibility Deal in UK
- 2010 report by Centre for Strategic Analysis of the Prime Minister of France
UK public health

- Government established ‘Responsibility Deal’ to work with industry (food, alcohol, physical activity, health at work, and behaviour change) – faster, cheaper?

- Voluntary agreements e.g. to reduce salt in some foods, reduce prominence of alcohol in some supermarkets, reduce strength of some beers
What’s wrong with nudging?
Evidence weak

- Few ‘nudges’ have been evaluated

- Those which have suggest patchy evidence of effectiveness e.g. ‘norm’ interventions for alcohol

- Studies in alcohol, food and tobacco suggest government regulation is effective; no evidence for voluntary agreements

- No evidence that responsibility deals faster or cheaper than regulation


"Rather than *nannying people*, we will nudge them by *working with industry* to make healthier lifestyles easier."

(Andrew Lansley, House of Commons)
Thaler and Sunstein themselves have no illusions about business interests

“[Where] consumers have a less than fully rational belief, firms often have more incentive to cater to that belief than to eradicate it”
(Nudge p.79–80)

Many on Responsibility Deal opposed previous actions such as traffic light warnings on food)
Sign-up patchy and many new pledges reflect existing standards
http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/?id=188
Government not consistent

- PH strategy – only resort to regulation where voluntary agreements shown to fail

- But then rapidly introduced 40p minimum unit price for 2014 despite health secretary’s opposition

- Industry needs consistent line
Conclusion

- Nudging does not offer evidence-based framework for public health
- ‘Libertarian paternalism’ is a defence of (limited) state intervention in USA
- Nudge shouldn’t become a fig leaf for reduced government regulation in Europe