



LETTERS

SUGAR IN FOOD

Public Health England's sugar reduction programme did not "fail"

Jack Winkler *emeritus professor of nutrition policy*

London Metropolitan University, London N7 8DB, UK

The BMJ's account of Public Health England's sugar reduction programme misleads readers. Public Health England did not "fail."¹

Measuring what food people buy is difficult, analysing the data arduous. Public Health England honestly acknowledged, up front, that the figures on sugar reductions in foods were based on purchasing surveys conducted in August-September 2017, 8-9 months before the report was published.

Reformulation takes time. Even with soft drinks, where sugar reduction is easiest, many companies only completed work just before the levy came into force. Reformulating foods is technically more difficult.

Further, as mentioned in our recent article for *BMJ Opinion*,² the UK's complex distribution system means that many products, successfully reformulated, are not yet in shops. They certainly were not available for purchase in August and September last year.

If we could have measured the extent of sugar reduction up-to-the-minute, in May 2018, the figure for foods would

certainly have been much larger than 2%, for drinks much larger than 11%. In the real world, today, the sugar reduction programme is probably a success.

But *The BMJ's* story carries a warning for Public Health England. Unless it changes or supplements its data sources, unless it shortens or changes its data analysis, then its next report, early in 2019, will generate more stories about slow progress. Public Health England will again be accused of failing. And that would be in no one's interest, least of all Public Health England's.

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Wise J. Sugar in food: critics urge tougher regulation as industry fails to meet reduction target. *BMJ* 2018;361:k2280. 10.1136/bmj.k2280 29789331
- 2 Winkler JT, Fry T. Making the healthy choice the cheaper choice. *BMJ Opinion* 2018, May 14. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/05/14/j-t-winkler-and-tam-fry-making-the-healthy-choice-the-cheaper-choice/>

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>