TAX ON SOFT DRINKS TO REDUCE OBESITY

Is a tax on sugary drinks too bitter to swallow?

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Briggs and colleagues’ study is a useful addition to the evidence on the potential health impact of taxes on sugar sweetened drinks. But to convince policy makers of the effectiveness of such taxes we urgently need experimental studies that allow stronger causal inference than modelled projections based on historic consumption data. Furthermore, non-economic determinants of food consumption such as taste, preference, and environmental cues have been largely overlooked. These taxes target people who may not find them acceptable and without support from voters, policy actions are less likely. The modest modelled effects of such taxes may not be sufficient to convince policy makers or the wider public of their value.

We need to reflect on the bigger picture of food policies and gain a better understanding of the food industry’s behaviour. For example, a 36% reduction in the reference price of sugar over 2006-10, owing to EU reforms, was associated with a 1.7-6.5% decrease in the price of sugary drinks in France. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimates that upcoming European Common Agricultural Policy reforms will decrease the price of sugar by 20-35%. How much of this reduction will be transmitted to consumers, and how much of any taxes on sugary drinks will the food industry be able to absorb and not pass on to consumers? There is a clear contradiction here between the potential effects of economic and health policies.

We do not want to imply that there is no place for taxes on sugary drinks. Theoretically they could reduce obesity, albeit by only a little. They may have a cumulative effect over time, but probably only if the message that accompanies them convinces people of real health benefits.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: www.bmj.com/content/347/bmj.f6189/rr/670856.

1 Briggs ADM, Mytton OT, Kehlbacher A, Scarborough P. Overall and income specific effect on prevalence of overweight and obesity of 20% sugar sweetened drink tax in UK: econometric and comparative risk assessment modelling study. BMJ 2013;347:f6189. (31 October.)


Cite this as: BMJ 2013;347:f7039

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