

EVIDENCE FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION ON NUTRITION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADIAN POLICY

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Common themes in discussions about legislation to promote healthy eating

- ⦿ Questions about the role of government intervention
- ⦿ Questions about evidence of potential effectiveness

Evidence and public health legislation

- ⦿ Development of legislation
- ⦿ Challenges to legislation
 - Is the measure rationally connected to its objective?
 - Is the measure the least intrusive means reasonably available to achieve the objective?

Limitations of evidence-based approaches

- Complex relationships between nutrition and chronic disease, between interventions and relevant behaviours, nutrition and chronic disease
- Challenges of assessing effectiveness of interventions in complex systems
- Policy implications: conservative bias, preference for certain types of interventions

Policy-making in the context of uncertainty

Uncertainty about risks and causes

- ⦿ Evidence-based approach = conservative
 - Prefers negative error (false negative) to positive error (false positive)
- ⦿ Alternative approach: precautionary principle
 - If risk is serious, action may be justified in the absence of conclusive evidence

Uncertainty about effectiveness of measure

- ⦿ Evidence-based approach = conservative
 - Prefers negative error (underestimate effectiveness) to positive error (overestimate effectiveness)
 - And, prefers certain types of interventions
- ⦿ Alternative approach???

Proposed new approaches

- ⦿ “Best available” v. “best possible” evidence
- ⦿ “Living experiments” approach
 - Act now, collect evidence later (and feed back)
 - Integrate evaluation into policy design and implementation

Challenges with this approach

- ⦿ Evaluation of “living experiments” will face same difficulties with evidence
- ⦿ Potential ethical issues
- ⦿ Entrenchment of existing policies
- ⦿ Need for consensus on criteria to select “promising” interventions
 - Strong prima facie evidence
 - Plausibility (theories of biology or behaviour)
 - Feasibility (economic, political)
 - Equity (distribution of benefits and harms)
 - Potential for unintended or harmful effects