

Essay

As obesity quickly becomes the number-one health threat in the United States, should the Federal Government apply excise taxes to high sugar, high fat content foods, including sodas, candies, and ice creams, as had been done with tobacco products?

The inherently flawed ideological machinery of our current government has created a product which must be immediately recalled by the American public. This “product” is the unreasonably high cigarette tax that increased this past April, created by the false notion of politicians that taxation as a form of legislation is an effective manner by which they should guide the behavior of the public in a certain direction. This unfair tax is the means by which government is attempting to attain a still desirable end, which is the improvement of public health. However, public health as affected by both cigarettes and unhealthy “food” products like candy and soda is most desirably addressed by government in positive ways that support and encourage healthy lifestyles. This contrasts with the current system, which instead penalizes unhealthy practices to the detriment of the right to choose what is good and right for one’s own life.

The most obvious and provocative error in the claims of tax supporters is that the tax “pays for itself.” Legislators rationalize that while smokers pay more for each pack of cigarettes, the decrease in tobacco use contributes to a lowered demand for healthcare. The reality, as validated by a study done by the New England Journal of Medicine, is that smoking actually lowers overall healthcare costs by decreasing life expectancy. This idea is also irrational in that the tax is unsustainable; it does not make sense to support health programs with tax money that comes from unhealthy practices. The government cannot expect to provide long-term funding for the State Children’s Health Insurance Program if said program relies on the use of tobacco, which the government is supposedly attempting to eradicate.

In order to encourage healthier lifestyles that would bring about a real decrease in healthcare expenditures, our government would most appropriately support proactive health programs on a decentralized and local scale. For example, I volunteered at an event called “Longest Day of Play,” which was a community celebration of good health practices. It featured sports and games for children in a way that motivated them to stay healthy, but was sadly not supported by the local government. Also, there are a number of things that government could do to make a local, organic agriculture system a more eminent reality. Efforts are pushing the metro government in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky to use tax money to subsidize farmers’ markets and fresh food stands in urban,

low-income neighborhoods called “food deserts.” These areas also happen to have among the highest smoking and obesity rates.

The positive effects of health *promotion* are perhaps less quantifiable, but in my opinion more powerful, in reflecting the public’s demand for improved health. If a person values his or her bodily well-being at a very young age, it is highly unlikely that he or she would engage in activities like smoking or consuming excessive amounts of foods with a high content of sugar, salt, or fat. While the tobacco, candy, fast food and soft drink industries inevitably lose when health becomes a priority, this brand of government-sponsored health promotion also has the benefit of a more gradual impact, which would allow regions that are economically dependent upon tobacco, like much of rural Kentucky, to adapt over time.

In order to preserve our most precious democratic ideals, choice must remain the most influential factor influencing one’s own well-being. The preservation of choice must be extended and protected by our government to the sphere of personal health, in which the government most effectively acts by supporting healthy activities instead of by ensuring the destruction of unhealthy practices.