

Re-thinking the "Soda Tax"

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In recent months much has been made of a recent study suggesting that taxing of sugar-sweetened beverages may be a key tool in the fight against obesity. I beg to differ. While I respect and admire the work of my colleagues who promote this cause, and value the scientific rigor with which they reviewed the available literature, I do not arrive at the same conclusion as they do in reviewing the issue in its broadest context.

The issue raises several concerns/thoughts:

- 1) I would fear that without a concentrated commitment to educating the public about healthier options that the choices made may shift away from high caloric beverages - yet land on equally unhealthy alternate choices (food substitution).
- 2) As with any large-scale government taxation program the concern would be that the extent of the taxation required for both creating the bureaucracy and funding the positive educational aspects that would be required to avoid equally unhealthy 'food substitution' may be unmanageable.
- 3) The example frequently cited in support of this initiative is the successful efforts to curb smoking through taxation. Unfortunately, the case for beverages does not mimic the situation with smoking as closely as some would have us believe. First, the negative outcome associated with consuming these beverages is perceived by the public as far less threatening and is less well-defined than it was for smoking. Smoking is clearly and directly linked to a single and specific disease for the most part in the eyes of the public - cancer. The public already accepts cancer as deadly. In the case of sugar sweetened beverages, the link with obesity and eventual health problems (including death) is perceived as less direct and possibly non-existent. Furthermore, in the case of smoking, the alternatives were fewer. You chose to smoke or not to smoke and by choosing not to smoke the public believed they would see a direct benefit. However, in the case of obesity, stopping the calories from these beverages is part of a larger whole that still requires controlling overall calorie intake and improving calorie burning efforts (exercise) if you are to fully benefit (or benefit at all).

In summary, while I think that we clearly need to consider these ways of thinking, perhaps targeting one food class among many that are damaging to our health with a reactionary taxation approach may not be ideal. After all, fast food, candy bars and countless other snack foods are likely equally culpable. Perhaps we should be considering a more comprehensive approach to the issue. Of course, a parallel effort to reduce the cost of healthier food and beverage choices would add some strength to such a proposal but this alone may be insufficient. Perhaps if we targeted the majority of "high energy density foods" with a taxation effort we could achieve a more global impact.

Most would agree that using volumetric eating principles (filling up on foods that have low calorie density) is an essential weight control strategy that helps us feel full on fewer calories thus improving the overall energy balance through reduced calorie consumption. In most cases foods that are high in caloric density are to be used sparingly if at all (sugar sweetened beverages among them). By taxing based on caloric density and directing some of these funds to subsidize production of healthier options we would make it less affordable to eat in unhealthy ways and more affordable to make better choices.

Of course any approach would require careful thought and planning - but it seems that focusing discouraging single food classes is not the answer to such a multifaceted issue.