



Editorial

## Public Health at Christmas

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Last Christmas the The TaxPayers' Alliance (2018) released its 'Nanny State approved Christmas lunch'. The Alliance claimed to have followed NHS nutritional guidelines to calculate "what a public health puritan approved Christmas lunch would look like". The lunch was suitably austere, comprising amongst (not many) other things, 125 grams of turkey, half a serving of boiled potatoes and 25 grams of sprouts. Dessert was frugal too, with only a tenth of a serving of Christmas pudding and 15 ml of brandy cream, although the 45 grams of cheese and 30 grams of pate have got me looking forward to December already. We haven't even got to the alcohol yet; where we were apparently limited to three quarters of a glass of wine and a quarter of a glass each of Champagne, gin and tonic, port and brandy (Other menus are available for readers with different culinary traditions and religious beliefs).

The TaxPayers' Alliance are a campaign group with a message of 'reforming taxes and public services, cutting waste and speaking up for British taxpayers' and a vision of 'A pro-enterprise country with lower simpler taxes funding better public services through innovation, automation and eradicating waste'. The Alliance was founded by someone who left the Conservative Party in 2003 because it was not sufficiently free market or individualist. Bizarrely, the TaxPayers' Alliance regards wasting taxpayers' money as short-sighted, unacceptable and immoral.

From an individualist and lower tax perspective the 'Nanny State approved Christmas lunch' is a great publicity stunt. It demonised dietary advice at exactly the time when many were planning, preparing or looking forward to the most important meal of their year, which caught headlines. The purpose though, was to draw attention to wasteful Public Health England, "who spend £40 million a year telling people how to live healthy lives." Their chief executive was quoted as saying "All year long taxpayer-funded public health Tsars tell us what to eat, drink and how to spend our leisure time . . . If they had it their way, we would be eating nothing but salad and Brussels sprouts this Christmas" (Jamieson, 2017).

The piece was published online by at least two right-leaning newsgroups on Christmas Eve and by a third on Christmas Day (Inge, 2017; Jamieson, 2017; Tominey, 2017). It was subsequently picked up around the world,

so that Phillip in Denbigh, United States wrote "*Health and safety*" at work again... bet the PHE officials won't be dining this lightly! and DrGreeenthumbs of Kenora, Canada posted *Oh f off government health chiefs... It's Christmas, it only happens once a year...* on the Mail Online (2018).

It's worth pointing out right now, just in case readers haven't noticed, that Scrooge does not work for Public Health England and that they did not advocate such a Christmas lunch. Sadly, many people were willing to believe they had, and most of the journalists never bothered to approach PHE for a view on it.

A great deal arises from this situation. First, there's an ecological fallacy. Secondly, there's an ethical imperative, and third, just why are people so resistant to the 'nanny state'?

To kick off then, I am guessing (The methods section is scant) that the lunch was calculated from dietary recommendations that are regarded as averages. If that is the case, then wise and educated CDH readers will know better than to apply averages to individual cases. Put another way, it's *Christmas*. For most of us that's a day of celebration and it's a *feast*. Online dictionaries define a feast as "a large meal, typically a celebratory one" or as "an annual religious celebration". Few of us maintain our Christmas diet for long (imagine turkey every day, or carp if you're eastern European). Heck, many of us embark on New Year diets and January detoxes in recognition of our hearty eating over the holiday. So, we can feast during the feast of Christmas.

Secondly, just what are we supposed to do if we know that excess calorific, fat, salt and alcohol intake cause disease and early death? Keep quiet about it? It would simply be unethical not to draw this to peoples' attention, let alone being wasteful of their time and lives and callous in the extreme.

And then lastly, there's the nanny state. To start with Phillip of Denbigh, United States, "*Health and safety*" is not the Nanny State. "The Nanny State" is a phrase used by individualists and libertarians to describe amongst other things, the acts of reducing deaths from traffic accidents, protecting us from others' tobacco smoke, minimising the likelihood of infection from dog faeces and restricting the sale of alcohol to children.

The Nanny State is seen as a threat because it undermines our personal autonomy. The notions of personal choice and individual freedom are fundamental to liberal democracies, and we all hate a dictator, or just someone telling us what to do. Moreover, there is a view that the loss of autonomy is in itself unhealthy, or vice versa. Both Sen's (1999) capability approach and Seedhouse's (2005) foundations place a primacy on something like autonomy. They regard health merely as a foundation or functioning towards autonomy or capability to choose. From these perspectives, being healthy is important because it gives us autonomy. It's worth pointing out that only rarely are public health actions completely prohibitive. They are usually limited to recommendations and fiscal measures. People can reject the advice and pay the tax, as they often do.

The NS is also perceived as elitist, paternalistic and patronising, believing that people do not know what is good for them. Maybe that's true, but there are plenty of patronising messages telling people that will look cooler if they smoke, that their families will be happier if they take them out for a hamburger or that their grandchildren will love them more if they give them sweets. Many organisations try to influence behaviours, so we might as well do it in the name of health as well as profit.

There are two more things we can do to rise above the paternalist critique of public health posited by libertarians. Public health activists can avoid acting as if individuals and populations cannot think for themselves. Hopefully, that will be easy to accomplish, because we don't often do that. However, we can also recognise that the influences that bear upon people are not equally distributed. We know that unhealthy lifestyles, including drinking too much alcohol at Christmas and overeating are more common in certain groups. That these things should cluster together so consistently indicates that not everyone has equal opportunity to choose.

With this in mind, we must move beyond focusing solely on educating people to behave in a particular way.

A complementary approach should go beyond lifestyle drift and exhortations about behaviour to ask, why is it that these causes of disease vary across society in such a predictable way? Why is choice not equally distributed? Public health activists should be focusing on changing these determinants of health, as well as changing behaviours as the causes of disease (Watt and Sheiham, 2012).

Mind you, the TaxPayers' Alliance will have something to say for next Christmas' publicity stunt if public healthers really do move against the power imbalances in society.

## References

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