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Policy Brief

Do people really want to be nudged towards healthy lifestyles?

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BACKGROUND

The idea that governments and regulators should try to ‘nudge’ consumers away from making poor-quality decisions has become an important topic in academic and public debate, especially after the publication of Thaler and Sunstein’s book *Nudge*. Advocates of nudging often claim that consumers are aware that they make bad decisions – for example, in diet and exercise – but suffer from a lack of self-control. As such, it is claimed, they *want* to be nudged.

METHODOLOGY

This is an opinion piece, based on a lecture given by Robert Sugden at the HEIRS (Happiness, Economics and Interpersonal Relations) conference on ‘Economics, Health and Happiness’ at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland in January 2016.

KEY FINDINGS

Sugden argues that the advocates of nudging grossly overstate the frequency of self-acknowledged self-control problems. It is true that many people are aware of expert advice about how to maintain good health, but choose not to act on it. But behavioural science shows that there are many ways in which people justify their own unhealthy choices without ever thinking that they are making mistakes. Although policy-makers may judge these to be “bad decisions”, this is not the view of the people who make them. Such people do *not* want to be nudged towards the decisions that experts deem to be best for them.

POLICY ISSUES

Advocates of nudging should be open about why they believe nudges to be justified. The common claim that the people want to be nudged (rather than thinking that nudges would be good for other people) should be treated with scepticism unless backed up by firm evidence.

ABOUT CCP

The Centre for Competition Policy (CCP), at the University of East Anglia, undertakes competition policy research, incorporating economic, legal, management and political science perspectives, that has real-world policy relevance without compromising academic rigour.

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Robert Sugden is a Professor of Economics at the UEA School of Economics and a member of the Centre for Competition Policy at the University of East Anglia. His research uses a combination of theoretical, experimental and philosophical methods to investigate issues in welfare economics, social choice, choice under uncertainty, the foundations of decision and game theory, the methodology of economics, and the evolution of social conventions. He is the author or editor of eight books, of which the most widely-read are Principles of Practical Cost-benefit Analysis (1978, with Alan Williams) and Economics of Rights, Co-operation and Welfare (1986 and 2004).

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