

NUDGING

AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Health nudges in the welfare state – potentials and limits?

Presentation and debate with Harvard Law Professor Cass R. Sunstein about the legitimacy of public health communication strategies in welfare states.

January 13, 15.00–17.00

Venue: Aalborg University, Copenhagen
A.C. Meyers Vænge 15
Auditorium 1.008

Programme:

15.00 – 15.15 : Introduction and welcome

15.15 – 16.00 : Presentation by Prof. Cass R. Sunstein

16.00 – 17.00 : Debate – questions from the panel and audience to Prof. Cass Sunstein

Moderator: Thomas Ploug, professor, member of The Danish Council of Ethics

Panel: To be announced



Professor Cass R. Sunstein is the acclaimed author with behavioural economist Richard Thaler of the book *Nudge – Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness* where they coin the concept of nudging. Nudges are attempts to shape individuals' context of choice with foreseeable effects on the individual's behavior while at the same time preserving that individual's freedom of choice. In the health area this popular but also contested idea translates to the notion that authorities may mildly “nudge” citizens in a more healthy direction without infringing their personal freedom.

Cass Sunstein has advised President Barack Obama whereas Richard Thaler has been involved in the development of UK Prime Minister David Cameron's “nudge unit”.

Different cases will be the turning point of the debate, see page 2.

Participation free of charge. Sign up as long as vacant seats remain by sending **name, place of work and email** to Ebba Johnsen at ebj@dketik.dk

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Cases for debate

Default screening programs

One example of nudging is the use of default models. For instance, in Denmark, 50–74 year old citizens are by default enrolled to participate in colorectal cancer screening programs, even though it is not obvious that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs to everyone. Citizens are free to decline, but it is well known from nudging studies that default models tend to be “sticky” – often, participation in default models happens without reflection. One reason could be that people have great faith in the beneficial nature of what is recommended by the authorities. In Denmark, the citizens’ trust in the authorities is often described as unusually high. But given this trust, and given the ambiguity about the benefit of participating, ought the Danish authorities not to be particularly hesitant about employing communication strategies with nudging effects?

Health prevention campaigns

When it comes to exercise, smoking or the consumption of alcohol, the evidence of harm and benefit is clear. The Danish population is following the international strong upwards trend concerning obesity with profound negative effects in terms of personal and societal costs and quality of life. But for various reasons, politicians in Denmark and elsewhere are hesitant about introducing hard legislation – or even nudging – as a means of addressing obesity problems. However, various other strategies are employed in Denmark, including nation-wide information campaigns and prevention programs often targeting groups with low average health, in the name of equality. Critics, however, point out that these campaigns are inefficient; that moralizing from the “health mafia” has gone too far; and that precisely these groups are harmed more than benefited because they lack the will and resources to change their life style, not the knowledge. Instead, some suggest, one ought to nudge people. Is “benign manipulation” the way forward for prevention in egalitarian societies?

Vaccination

To ensure group immunity, there is a strong societal interest in achieving a high rate of vaccination. Because of frequent suspicions about side effects, however, many are hesitant about enrolling themselves or their children in national vaccination programmes. This increases the risk of outbreaks of diseases like measles and cancers caused by viruses. Ought the authorities to push harder to persuade everybody to participate – and using what means?

Genetic risk information

A revolution in the area of genetic analysis means that also people with no known hereditary condition may now have their genes analyzed for a mapping of genetically based sensitivities related to e.g. cancers, diabetes or heart disease. Thus, such data may encourage people to pursue healthier life styles. The data, however, is very uncertain and may lead to unfounded concern or a false sense of safety. Should the use of predictive testing nonetheless be encouraged as a way of nudging people to live more healthy lives?

