

Economic evaluation of prevention: we need to do better but first we need to sort out what the good is

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The starting point in any economic evaluation is: what is the objective of the intervention being considered or, somewhat more broadly, what good (and what bad) might it do if implemented.

Most health economists in conducting economic evaluations of health interventions assume that health is the good sought – and only that. In the case of prevention and health promotion the impact on health is often all that is included in the evaluation space.

That seems at best narrow, at worst misguided and when it is health economists who make this judgment – and usually without any evidence to support it – then also arrogant and inappropriate. In a health world of evidence-based medicine, seeking to compete for scarce resources in the same reductionist paradigm as that adopted by the clinical fraternity is suicidal for prevention and health promotion.

It is reasonable of course to assume that the good of prevention and health promotion has something to do with health. But what – and is that all? My own earliest sojourn in this area (in the early 1970s) was in evaluating the Green Cross Code in the UK which aimed to get kids to stop, look and listen before crossing the road. It was put out on TV with lots of screeching of brakes as cars sought to avoid kids who did not follow the code. It also got at mums (and dads but to a lesser extent) to make them more responsible for their kids' road crossing skills.

It was very successful in terms of resource costs and outcomes in terms of lives saved and injuries prevented. So much so that the UK Treasury at that time decided on the strength of the results of the economic evaluation I conducted to invest more in road safety publicity.

But thinking back now, what about all the anxiety (and guilt?) the campaign created in kids and their parents? This was not

mentioned in the evaluation. So often defining the good ignores whatever bad is created.

What is the good of health promotion? Is it the promotion of health? If a campaign to get people to eat more healthy food does not result in any change in dietary habits has it failed even if people now choose to eat the same food but on a now more informed basis? Is the good 'health' or 'informed choice'? What value has individual autonomy?

And who should decide what the good of prevention and health promotion is? Surely not the analysts! Better by far the informed community affected – in other words the autonomy of the community needs to be respected.

What we so often see in government policy however is respect for the autonomy of the market with firms left free to advertise their wares on TV etc., no matter the harm they may do to the public good and consumers 'free' to choose between McDonalds and Hungry Jacks. The voices of citizens qua citizens are not listened to. In turn such political economy concerns are totally ignored in any economic evaluation.

On the cost side, what about the costs of overcoming lethargy in making life style changes? How many economic evaluations on physical fitness interventions take account of the 'costs' of getting out of bed at 6 in the morning – especially cold and dark winter mornings – to go to the gym?

Shaking our analysts' heads in sadness at the irrationality of our fellow men and women that the recommendations to eat more healthily based on economic evaluations that show that the resource costs are far outweighed by the health benefits gets us nowhere beyond being middle class allies to the junk food industry who peddle obesity. We need to look again at what the good of such interventions is and, in the light of that, at how good our economic evaluations really are.

Those who argue that prevention is better than cure need to prove it and certainly economic evaluation is one way to do this. But they need to recognise better first the costs of necessary changes in life style; second the frailty of human nature;

and third that the source of so many of the problems of public ill health is the search for more and bigger profits by the junk food and other industries.

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