



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on September 18, 2009

Fighting Fat by Taxing Soft Drinks

More U.S. health experts have added their voices to the chorus calling for a tax on soft drinks designed to discourage consumption, Reuters reported on September 16.

New York City health commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley, nutritionist Dr. Walter Willett of the Harvard School of Public Health, obesity expert Kelly Brownell from Yale University in Connecticut, and others made their proposal in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.



“We propose an excise tax of one percent per ounce for any beverages that have any added caloric sweetener,” they wrote.

“Much as taxes on tobacco products are routine at both state and federal levels because they generate revenue and they confer a public health benefit with respect to smoking rates, we believe that taxes on beverages that help drive the obesity epidemic should and will become routine.”

The group of experts estimates that “a tax of one cent per ounce of beverage would increase the cost of a 20-ounce soft drink by 15 to 20 percent.” They believe this would be enough disincentive that consumption would drop by 10 percent, and that this would affect an individual’s weight. “A consumer who drinks a conventional soft drink (20 ounces or 591 millilitres) every day and switches to a beverage below this threshold would consume approximately 174 fewer calories each day.”

The experts note that “currently, 33 states have sales taxes on soft drinks (mean tax rate 5.2 percent), but the taxes are too small to affect consumption and the revenues are not earmarked for programs related to health.” Significant amounts of money could be obtained by allocating the tax revenue to health programs. The Congressional Budget Office calculated in December 2008 that a three-cent tax on a 12-ounce can of soda could generate \$50 billion over 10 years.

Americans Against Food Taxes — a coalition of Welch’s, PepsiCo Inc., McDonald’s Corp., Burger King Holdings, the American Beverage Association, and the Corn Refiners Association — is opposed to the soft drink tax. While this industry group may be in opposition because it doesn’t want to lose profits, it would be able to make a point that soft drinks shouldn’t be singled out. If a soft drink tax is instituted, then a doughnut tax, a candy bar tax, an ice cream tax, and a chewing gum tax should also be put into place.

Susan Neely, president and chief executive officer for the American Beverage Association, declared in a statement: “We agree that obesity is a serious public health issue, but the solution put forth by these researchers simply won’t work. Reducing obesity will only be addressed through comprehensive



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solutions.”

“Importantly, taxes will not teach our children how to live a healthy lifestyle,” Neely said. But the experts who so blithely recommend taxes “for our own good” do have a lesson they want to teach, and it’s not about healthy living. These experts, whether they realize it or not, see government as the nanny who should benignly watch over us, making sure that we take care of ourselves for the good of society.

The lesson these so-called health experts want us to learn is to depend on government to solve our problems. Are too many citizens making the free choice to overeat and become overweight? Then they see it as being government’s job to take away some of our freedom to make sure we aren’t abusing it.

Our Founding Fathers, some of whom probably enjoyed the occasional pint of Sam Adam’s finest, knew that government’s only proper function was to protect the life, liberty, and property of its citizens. Government ought to intervene in personal affairs only when one citizen does direct harm to another.

A view of government as the babysitter of its citizens was anathema to the Founders, who knew how easily the surrender of liberty to government can forge shackles of dependence. The citizen is quickly reduced to begging for his very sustenance from the hand of his master, be that master King George or Uncle Sam.

The last draught here should be left to Samuel Adams, whose words, though they have a strong taste, are the proper stinging rebuke to those who prefer comforting servitude to government over the risks of personal liberty, who willingly lick the hand of government and say thank you for the privilege, and who would so gladly tax us to death for the sake of our health:

If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, go home from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or your arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains set lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that you were our countrymen.



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