Nobel Prizes, Nudge Theory, and Public Health

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At this time of the year, newspapers and scientific journals contain many articles on the award of the Nobel Prizes. These were established in 1895 as the legacy of the inventor Albert Nobel, who made his fortune by inventing the explosive dynamite, and are administered by Sweden and Norway. A visit to the Nobel Prize museum in Stockholm is always inspiring as you wander among the donated memorabilia from the famous scientists honored there. Public health is represented by many medical advances including malaria, typhus, radiology, the discovery of several vitamins, and the work of Albert Schweitzer. The 1943 prize was given for work on vitamin K, a vitamin that is currently in the spotlight again as several countries and organizations are reaffirming the importance of vitamin K injections at birth to prevent neonatal hemorrhagic disease.¹²

The Nobel Prize for Peace for 2017 was awarded to International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, “for its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its groundbreaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons.” All public health workers support this aim as improving the public’s health depends on peace, a principle adopted by APACPH (Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health) and highlighted in the many workshops on peace convened by our former Secretary General, Prof Walter Patrick. This year’s Nobel Prize for literature was given to Kazuo Ishiguro. He wrote several wonderful very British novels (he lived in England from the age of 5), including The Remains of the Day, which was made into a brilliant film.

But this year the prize that caught our attention was the prize for Economic Sciences, which was won by Prof Richard H. Thaler “for his contributions to behavioral economics.” A previous winner of this prize was Prof Gunnar Myrdal in 1974, and his book The Challenge of World Poverty espousing untied international aid became an important reference for international health students. Behavioral economics draws on consumer psychology to understand the decision making behind an economic outcome, for example, why we buy one product instead of another.

Its philosophy is that people should not be forced to act in certain ways, but rather gently encouraged to act in ways that are better for them or help them stopping bad habits formed over time. This idea of a “gentle push” or “nudge” is based on libertarian paternalism, and favors invitations to change behaviors, rather than the introduction of constraints and sanctions to obtain behavior change.³

It revolves around 2 key principles that affect individuals’ decisions: biases in decision making and influences from the social environment.³

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In public health and health promotion, there is a need to change the behavior of populations to maximize health and life expectancy. Van Den Broucke suggests that we should utilize the technology of nudge theory to move populations toward healthy behaviors.\(^4\) A good reason for public health workers to understand and study “nudges” is that it is a technique often used by industry to promote their own products and services regardless of their effect on health. One example we see every day is the location of sweets and candy near the supermarket checkout where they are seen and desired by children (and of course adults). Understanding what is happening in this situation may help avoid unhealthy behaviors. When applied to public health it could be summarized as taking small steps to make healthy choices easy choices.

When discussing the need for women to breastfeed for longer to promote the health of their infants, Perez-Escamilla discusses “identifying the right systems and individual incentives needed to nudge more women to breastfeed for longer.”\(^5\) He suggests actions including removing the promotion or sale of infant formula from health services as steps toward nudging mothers toward breastfeeding choices and has expanded the theoretical basis for these actions.\(^6\) Saghai discusses the ethics of “nudge” and then gives an example of its use from food service:

A cafeteria manager places healthy food at eye-level at the beginning of the food queue. Unhealthy food comes last and is least visible. The customer is then more likely to purchase healthy food.\(^7\)

A singular emphasis on health behavior is not without criticism as the world is a much more complex place. Usually outcomes are the result of a complex web of causation and not a simple chain of causes as implied by nudge theory.\(^4,8\) Health outcomes result from a complex mix of environmental, social, cultural, and genetic factors and not just to health behaviours.\(^9\) Nudge theory has the potential to degenerate into another round of “victim blaming” where the overwhelming presence of poverty, lack of services, poor health literacy, and so on make achieving a healthy lifestyle impossible.\(^7,10\) Behavior-change models could not sufficiently empower people and thereby increases health inequalities.\(^4\) In some public health priorities there is no alternative but to provide interventions that apply to the whole community, including quarantine, banning advertising of harmful products, and making safety compulsory.

Health is the major priority of modern societies. We all want to achieve optimal health and live productive and fulfilling lives. The goal of public health is to deliver health to all. The use of gentle nudge toward healthy behaviors can sometimes contribute to that goal.

The journal editors would like to thank the authors who have contributed to our journal over the past year. As authors ourselves, we appreciate the large amount of work that goes into preparing manuscripts that will ultimately help our societies improve the health and well-being of our fellow citizens. We understand how disappointing it is not to have your paper accepted, but we try and select the most relevant high-quality public health public health papers from across our region. We usually assess citations over a 2-year period as it takes some time for them to accumulate. This year, our most cited publications have been on the topics of the Fukushima nuclear disaster and articles related to public health nutrition. The Fukushima supplement included one article describing the use of “nudge theory” to assist in communicating risk after the disaster.\(^11\) The most cited article during the past 2 years was our review of the long-term public health benefits of breastfeeding.\(^12\) At the 2018 APACPH conference, which will be held in September in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, we are planning a preconference workshop on infant nutrition and public health, and we invite you to plan to attend the conference.

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References