



# The Guardian

The Guardian, Charlottetown, March 10, 2014

## Government spending, taxing more won't make you healthy

By KEVIN LACEY  
COMMENTARY

What can be done to make Islanders healthier?

That is the question with which the P.E.I. Department of Health is currently wrestling.

In the past few months, the Department has launched a discussion paper titled *Towards a Culture of Wellness* and an accompanying survey seeking views from Islanders as to what role they see government taking.

At some point, the minister of health will present a long-term plan based on the discussion paper that will be designed to help Islanders slim down and shape up.

But this seemingly altruistic government goal could lead to some policies that may just make the government coffers fat and your wallet a little thinner.

One of those ideas comes from retiring Assistant Chief Medical Officer Lamont Sweet. His idea is to put a tax on some drinks.

Sweet claims a small tax on sugary drinks would force people to choose something else to quench their thirst.

But the evidence says otherwise.

Research shows a "small" tax like the one suggested by the medical officer would do little to nothing to actually

change people's behaviour or to make anyone healthier. Instead, people just pay the tax and then keep doing what they are doing, or they find ways to avoid paying the tax. The only winner with these types of taxes is the government who pockets all the revenue.

The other problem with these taxes is it targets the wrong culprit.

Over the past 15 years, overall soda consumption in Canada is on the decline. Yet, at the same time obesity rates continue to increase. If soda consumption has so much to do with the growing waistlines of adults and children alike, why does there seem to be an inverse relationship between them?

While there have been a handful of public studies showing a connection between soda and childhood obesity there have been more that are unable to find any link.

For example, a study of Grade 5 students in Nova Scotia compared the availability of soft drinks in school cafeterias and found no difference in the risk of weight gain between children who could drink soda at school and those who do not. However, "the association between obesity levels and frequency of physical education classes was striking," the report found.

Children in families that ate dinners

together were also less likely to be overweight.

So if hiking taxes won't change people's behaviour and pop is not the guilty culprit that many like Dr. Sweet make it out to be, why is the government also looking to spend money to launch an advertising campaign to tell you that drinking pop is not healthy? Most people know that anyway.

But that is exactly what *Towards a Culture of Wellness* calls for. It suggests the provincial government spend thousands of dollars on advertising to tell you about the perils of pop.

Government spending is all about priorities. With the province spending \$59 million more than it takes in this year, should the government be spending thousands on these ads instead of improving the provincial finances or better yet, funding health services for people who are actually sick?

The truth is the responsibility for one's health should not be that of the government.

The only way to ensure a long lasting and healthier society is for people themselves to make the decisions to change their habits.

Kevin Lacey is Atlantic Director for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. You can find more information at [Taxpayer.com](http://Taxpayer.com)