

February 2005, Paper of the Month

- Paper:** Economic analysis of eating and physical activity: A next step for research and policy change
- Authors:** Hill JO, Sallis JF, Peters JC.
- Source:** American Journal of Preventive Medicine 2004; 27 (3S) 111-116

The review:

The *Partnership to Promote Healthy Eating and Active Living* was formed to assess the impact of economics on food intake and physical activity, and how economics can inform interventions that address these behaviours. Today's social and economic systems which promote unhealthy food consumption and provide appealing sedentary entertainment options greatly challenge health promotion efforts. In recognition of the limitations of psychosocial models in achieving sustainable behaviour change at the population level, economic analysis is offered as a tool for developing an understanding of how powerful market forces that influence behaviour can be used as instruments of change.

The relevance of this paper:

This paper was chosen because it goes beyond acknowledging that eating and physical activity are affected by policies and physical environments. Laying foundations for a conceptual model for analysing the economic forces that play a monumental role in creating the environments, in which both behaviour takes place and policy is developed.

The paper emphasizes the need to integrate economic principles more effectively into health promotion practice. Highlighting the necessity to expand cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis models, to look at how both individual and social goals are met within the constraints of available resources. Thus recognizing that choices are often made for reasons other than those that tie directly to health.

Both economics and health are highly valued by society yet the two are often in conflict. The paper questions whether the choices that people are able to make about eating and physical activity really do maximize their happiness, in light of possible negative health consequences in the long-term. This provides a different perspective on whether markets are working well, and how decisions are made about short-term economic growth and long-term health outcomes.

It points out that physical activity and sedentary behaviours are linked with a diverse set of players, many of whom do not recognize their responsibility as stakeholders within this domain. Further it underlines that little is currently known about the economic drivers of physical activity, and that this needs to be addressed. The authors ask the hard questions and challenge a wide range of disciplines to broaden their thinking and incorporate these thoughts into their decision making.

Strategies need to be expanded to work at multiple levels, through "motivating and educating individuals, whilst also working with the private and public sector to create environments and incentives that enable and encourage healthful choices". This requires rethinking research directions and priorities, coupled with an increased awareness of our responsibilities. For those working within 'health' a more comprehensive appreciation of what drives behaviour is required, and this must be factored into research and the development of interventions.

This paper is one of a series in the supplement exploring the relationship between economics, food intake and physical activity, resulting from the work of the *The Partnership*. Together they set the stage for integrating the disciplines of public health and economics, to better inform policy decisions and interventions aimed at promoting healthy living choices.