

## Paper of the Month, July

**Paper:** Whither health promotion events? A judicial approach to evidence.  
**Authors:** Whitelaw, S and Watson, J.  
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This paper reviews the usefulness, relevance and effectiveness of health “events” such as No Smoking Day, World Aids Day, and, in the physical activity domain, campaigns such as the BBC’s Fighting Fat Fighting Fit campaign from 1999. The review was undertaken for the Health Education Board for Scotland where almost 50 such events existed in 2003. The authors undertook a review of both the published and informal/grey literature. They also conducted telephone interviews with 22 relevant health professionals in Scotland and the UK to examine the status of such events in the field and to build as wide and complex a picture of evidence as possible. Health events, according to this review, encompass a wide range of activities which may vary in scale (one-off or on-going), complexity (single or multiple component), focus (generic or focused on a particular health topic), target, and, most importantly, may have different goals, e.g. awareness raising, profile promotion, or health advocacy. There are relatively few references to specific physical activity campaigns in the paper, but it provides a thought-provoking insight into health campaigns in other topic areas.

The authors state that, considering the long-term existence of mass events in health promotion, there is a surprising dearth of high quality evaluative literature. Furthermore, the authors state, much of the literature appears to be methodologically simple, descriptive, and lacking robustness. The quality data that exist suggest that health events have limited effects, particularly on attitudes and behaviours, and that these are likely to be short-term. For example, one theoretically sound physical activity campaign, the UK Health Education Authority’s ACTIVE for LIFE campaign, was unsuccessful in improving physical activity, and there was no significant difference in knowledge by awareness of the campaign advertisement. There is also some suggestion of paradoxical campaign effects at a population level, whereby health events appealed mainly to those who were not in the target group. An example of this in relation to physical activity was the BBC Fighting Fit Fighting Fat campaign in 1999 where respondents were less likely to be obese and more likely to be from a higher socioeconomic group. Literature from the anti-smoking field appears somewhat more encouraging. Descriptive literature on No Smoking Day cites impressive effects (see [www.nosmokingday.org.uk](http://www.nosmokingday.org.uk)) and some academic evaluations suggest event-specific reductions of between 1-5% in smoking prevalence. Other literature suggests more moderate effects on intent to change behaviour, and on knowledge and attitudes.

Some health professionals felt that health events had pragmatic and political outcomes, e.g. keeping health on the agenda and maintaining a public profile. Some had practical concerns, such as the time-consuming nature of such events. Others felt that events did not address the needs of particular social groups and thus could widen inequalities. While an academic appraisal of the literature would suggest that health events are, on the whole, ineffective, the wide definition of the term “health event” makes it difficult to

pool evidence. The aims of events are multiple and varied, and sometimes indicators may be profound and elusive, e.g. cultural change. Establishing tight intervention-outcome causality is clearly challenging. It is, for example, difficult to attribute impacts unequivocally to campaigns and separate the effects from secular trends. Proof of evidence is poor, whether due to the mitigating effect of barriers or a paucity of attempts at generating evidence. Finally, the authors suggest that perhaps political circumstances have allowed health events to continue without substantial scrutiny:- health events create an impression of action and visibility, they counteract unhealthy information, and/or there is a common-sense hunch that health events work.

The approach taken in the review is debated at length. It is not a systematic review, but a more flexible judicial discussion paper which allowed the authors to deal with the complexity of the area. The authors conclude that there are some examples of relatively high-quality evaluations, and some evidence that events have some uses, and strong professional and political support for health events. However, there is no escaping the fact that the evidence base is generally weak. The authors refer to guidelines published in the theoretical literature which could inform future health events and be applied in systematically selecting events that would contribute to a wider health promotion effort.