

The Trials and Tribulations of Developing Evidence-based Public Health Guidance: the experience of NICE with nutrition-related interventions

Professor Mike Kelly

Director of the Centre for Public Health Excellence

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

London, UK

Since 2005 NICE has had a responsibility to provide national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health. This guidance is for the NHS but also for the wider public health community including local government, employers, the education system, the DH and other national policy-makers and the public. Of the topics reviewed many are directly or indirectly related to nutrition, such as physical activity, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and maternal and child health. In conducting its work, NICE bases recommendations on the best available evidence and, where possible, determines cost-effectiveness using the quality-adjusted life-year (QALY) as a measure of outcome. It is clear about scientific and social values and independent of government, industry and other vested interests. The main technique for identifying and synthesising the evidence base is systematic reviewing, which works well if there are plentiful studies, many of which are trials and the PICO framework can be applied. It also works better if the evidence is based on the individual rather than relationships between groups of individuals, and the problem is concerned with individual behaviour with a short pathway from intervention to outcome. True cost-effectiveness can only be determined with good information on the costs of an intervention and how it is done in practice. However, major uncertainties remain, e.g. causality in modelling and transferability of study results. Some element of deliberation is required to reach decisions, and the challenges of combining rationalism and empiricism to provide evidence-based guidance are discussed with examples from the field of nutrition.