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Research Paper

Nanny or canny? Community perceptions of government intervention for preventive health


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Abstract

Critics of government intervention for the prevention of lifestyle-related chronic disease often conceptualise such efforts as ‘nanny state’, reflecting a neoliberal perspective and derailing wider debate. However, it is unknown how the community perceives such interventions. This study explored community perceptions of government intervention for the prevention of lifestyle-related chronic disease in Australia.

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conceptualisations, namely government as a: canny investor; leader on positive health behaviour; partner or facilitator for health. Respondents’ level of support for specific interventions overlaid these general conceptualisations with considerations of the target population and risk factor, intervention mechanism and government motives. Community perceptions regarding prevention therefore reflect more thoughtful and complex interpretations of preventive actions and policies than suggested by nanny state conceptualisations. We argue that advocates and legislators should not allow debate around preventive measures to be restricted to the nanny state-libertarian continuum, but engage the community in more collectivist considerations of future health costs, beneficiaries, equity and likely outcomes of both action and inaction in order to garner community support and identify information gaps.

Keywords: Qualitative research health policy non-communicable disease healthy lifestyle

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