

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Focused on working with policy makers and practice partners
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)
- A UK Public Health Research Centre of Excellence

Are financial incentives accepted for promoting healthy behaviours?

Financial incentives appear to be acceptable for promoting healthier behaviours such as quitting smoking and physical activity, if they are shown to be effective and cost effective, when they are perceived as fair, and when they are delivered to 'deserving' groups such as pregnant women.

Having a healthy lifestyle helps to protect individuals from ill-health. This in turn helps to reduce spending on treating the consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle, such as obesity, heart disease and some cancers.

Financial incentives have been proposed to help motivate individuals to be healthier. Different types of financial incentive schemes have been trialled, including providing people with cash, prizes, shopping vouchers, and lottery tickets to encourage them to alter their health behaviours. Behaviours rewarded with a financial incentive have included stopping smoking, attending vaccination and screening appointments, losing weight, and taking more regular physical activity. A recent systematic review undertaken by Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, found that financial incentives were effective at encouraging individuals to stop smoking, attend their vaccination and screening appointments and to do more physical activity in particular.

Whilst there is increasing evidence that health promoting financial incentives may be a useful method to encourage individuals to be healthy, there is limited evidence concerning how acceptable these interventions are to stakeholders. Important stakeholders include: recipients of incentives, the public who may pay for incentive schemes through taxation, and policy makers and health professionals who would be involved in the design and delivery of any schemes. Successful

delivery of incentive programmes require that they are acceptable to all stakeholders.

To better understand the level of acceptability around financial incentives, researchers from Fuse searched for and collated academic opinion and research evidence on this topic. This was the first systematic review to collate evidence and debate around the use of financial incentives to promote healthy behaviours.

Key Findings

- Health promoting financial incentives are viewed as more acceptable if they are perceived as fair, if individuals engage in the schemes voluntarily, and if they do not discriminate against any one population group.
- If financial incentives are found to be effective and cost effective, then schemes are more acceptable, on the basis that they will help to reduce spending on health care as a consequence of unhealthy lifestyle behaviours.
- Shopping vouchers rather than cash rewards are viewed as more acceptable, because there is less opportunity for recipients to misuse the reward, for example, spending the money on more cigarettes.
- Certain population groups are seen as more acceptable recipients of financial incentives, such as pregnant women and low income groups.
- Financial incentives are viewed as acceptable if they promote individuals to take responsibility for their behaviours, and when they provide an initial motivation to change.
- Where concern exists around financial incentives, it is in relation to individuals 'gaming the system', i.e. cheating in order to obtain the financial incentives. To overcome this problem, it is essential that financial incentives schemes are monitored.

Policy relevance and Implications

- Health promoting financial incentives may be an acceptable addition to the 'behaviour change toolkit', particularly if they are shown to be effective and cost effective.
- Careful consideration around the design and delivery of financial incentives is needed to ensure that schemes are acceptable to the wider public. This will require further research on the most acceptable format, value and timing of financial incentives.
- A lack of in-depth research exists on the acceptability of financial incentives to a variety of stakeholders. In particular, the views of policy makers and health professionals have not been widely assessed.
- To assess the effectiveness of different types of incentive designs, exploratory studies may be useful to compare and contrast different intervention approaches.

“Financial incentives for promoting healthy behaviours are acceptable if they are fair, cost-effective, and benefit individuals and the wider society”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Researchers from Fuse looked at 54 works including academic opinion and evidence, to explore whether financial incentives are deemed acceptable for promoting healthier lifestyle behaviours in individuals. Financial incentives are considered acceptable if they: benefit recipients and wider society; are considered fair; and are delivered to individuals who are deemed appropriate.

Emma L Giles, Shannon Robalino, Elaine McColl, Falko F Sniehotta & Jean Adams: *Acceptability of financial incentives for encouraging uptake of healthy behaviours: a critical review using systematic methods.*

Web: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743514005118

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

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