

Funding the Future

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Wes Streeting says cutting 50 calories a day will solve obesity and save the NHS. That's bad politics, bad science and classic neoliberal blame-shifting. In this video, I take apart his arguments and ask whether he's naive or deliberately complicit in weakening our NHS.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuWhX2ma1yY&si=pgGAanGc5kG2MN9K>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=x3mvd-18f25a4-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Wes Streeting is the UK Health Secretary, and last weekend he made a claim which was shockingly wrong.

He said that if people in the UK simply cut their daily calorie intake by 50, obesity in this country would halve.

340,000 children, he said, would cease to be obese as a result, and 2 million adults would also cease to be obese.

It sounds incredibly simple, but let's be clear about it. This is both bad politics and bad science. As usual, Wes Streeting got everything wrong.

Let's talk about the politics first of all, because, in many ways, that's the easiest bit to explain.

Wes Streeting's strategy is incredibly clear. What he's trying to do is blame the public. That's you, and that's me for the crisis, in the NHS.

He's saying it's our fault that we have an NHS in crisis, and it can't supply the treatments that we want for things other than obesity, because we're eating too much.

This is just standard Labour policy. We've seen it with regard to disability benefits. They're saying it's the fault of the disabled that they can't get into work to make the money that they should be able to generate for themselves, to pay for the needs that they have, and therefore, they'll cut benefits and force them into doing so. Everything, according to Labour, is someone else's fault when that's not true. Most disabled people who have claimed benefits claim them because they need them.

People who are obese are, by and large, through no fault of their own, and I'll explain why in a minute, but Labour always seeks to dodge the real solutions that are required to any problem, because they pass the blame to someone else.

I've recently described this as being in the Pontius Pilate School of Politics. Wes Streeting is washing his hands of the problem of obesity and blaming others and saying, tough luck if the NHS can't now supply what you need. It's all your fault, not mine. And meanwhile, Streeting and Labour will be denying that they have any duty to solve the NHS and will instead be saying, "If you want a service that we can no longer supply, just call the private sector, they'll sort it for you," as if that is their real strategy.

So, if Labour's strategy with regard to the NHS, as far as politics is concerned, is flawed because what it actually leads to is private medicine, and that's not what people want, let's talk about the science.

The science that Wes Streeting is using is based upon a deeply out-of-date notion that has long been discredited in medical literature, which is that calories taken into our bodies equal calories out, and that if we don't use the calories that we take in, they turn into fat.

And this presumes that we are, what are called in scientific terms, closed systems. In other words, the environment around us doesn't matter when it comes to our health, because everything that matters with regard to our health is all about what our bodies are programmed to do, and this is completely untrue.

Very obviously, we are not closed systems, and the easiest way in which we know that is that we require food to come into us to make our bodies work. So the simple fact is that what we eat determines how much fuel we burn in our bodies. It's not just a matter of how many calories are in it. Calories are not neutral in this sense.

And again, medical literature, and I've taken advice on this issue, shows that this is true. In particular, and let's name the culprit, ultra-processed food is deliberately designed to lower our ability to burn calories. And it does that for one very good reason. Because it behaves in this way, it sends our brains a signal that we aren't full. And as a consequence, we are hungry, and therefore we need to eat more, and therefore we buy more ultra-processed food, and therefore we increase the profits of the companies making it, and that's why those foods are so dangerous.

It's basic science, and it's basic politics, mixed together, and Wes Streeting is ignoring that fact. He is presuming that all foods behave within us in the same way, but they don't. Our food environment matters.

But the fact is that what foods we can consume is very largely shaped by what's out there in the supermarkets, by what's promoted on television, and on food programmes, and on YouTube, and in other media, and so on. And everywhere, what is being promoted to us is high sugar content food that is going to addict us to repetitive eating, which is going to lead to the obesity problem.

The issue that we have, the issue that Wes Streeting has with obesity, is not that we lack willpower or choice; he's ignoring the fact that there is out there an industry that wants to addict us to its foods, and he's refusing to address that.

In fact, when he said that this problem existed, he said how businesses wanted to react to that, and he was referring to the food manufacturers and the food retailers when saying it was up to them. If they wanted to still promote two for one on high sugar content, frankly, dangerous foods for our wellbeing, that was okay with him; he wasn't going to regulate.

But the fact is, he's also ignoring another reality, which is that however much you exercise, you can't exercise yourself out of a bad diet. We are not a closed system. There's nothing that we can do about a bad diet if that's what we are being fed through no fault of our own.

So, Wes Streeting, saying that people must eat less, is ignoring the reality of what the food companies are doing to us. Unless he plans to regulate sugar, alcohol, ultra-processed foods and predatory marketing, with the last being particularly important, then the market has free rein to do whatever it wants and promote obesity day in, day out, meaning that food addiction will remain, and nothing will happen as a consequence of his comments.

Wes Streeting is therefore delivering neoliberal irresponsibility. He's letting markets create a crisis. He's saying people have the choice as to what they want to eat when they don't, because that is manipulated before they even get to making a choice. And when they get to make that choice, everything that is on offer to them is, by and large, addictive. And he says it's not the government's job to intervene, and therefore it's our

fault that we are obese. And the result is that, he says, the NHS will inevitably be weakened, and there's nothing that can be done about that. But, as I said previously, that provides the private sector with all the opportunities that he wants to give to it, so long as, of course, you can afford to pay; the ultimate neoliberal answer to every question.

So the questions that I've got are very straightforward. Is Wes Streeting too naive to see how markets are using him? Or is he a willing participant in undermining public health because that's what he's doing? Or maybe, is it both?

Either way, Labour is failing, again, to defend the NHS and us, and for that, we have to hold it accountable.

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).