

Most dietary advice has been wrong for over 50 years

If you've run a business for a long time (46 years, in my case), you become accustomed to a torrent of well-meaning advice from experts and professionals, much of it conflicting. And much of it is wrong... although some of it is right.

In fact, we all make choices in life, weighing up the evidence from both experts and non-experts, relying, as best we can, on common sense, experience and maybe even education.

There is an old political adage – 'to govern is to choose' – which is true.

But it is also relevant to our daily life – to live is to choose, which is why democracy, for all its faults, is so successful.

We try to stay on the upward escalator by making the best choices we can in life – about pints of beer, cars, brands of butter, financial advice, political parties, friends, lovers etc.

You name it – and our brains whir away, poring over the evidence, often subconsciously.

One of the most difficult areas for decisions relates to health.

It's difficult to pick up a newspaper these days without being hit with a new theory, often from someone with some sort of scientific or medical background.

Coffee is bad for you, it used to be said.

Now, the theory goes (see article 1, opposite) that drinking four to six cups a day, as you get older, helps to avoid 'frailty'.

I can vouch for this, since I drink this much coffee on two or three days a week, when calling on pubs, and can often be found breakdancing down Britain's high streets as dusk approaches... never been arrested yet, mind you.

Experts

Seriously though, I suspect that advice from experts about the health benefits of doubling or tripling coffee consumption needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Ah, salt – a very interesting area!

About 10 years ago, Wetherspoon was berated for the high-ish salt content of one of our menu items.

I agreed to appear on BBC Radio 4 with renowned anti-salt campaigner Professor Graham MacGregor, founder of Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), ready, as I've previously said, to eat low-salt humble pie.

Before the MacGregor debate, in investigating the government's salt advice, I was very surprised to find out that there was no real 'consensus' among medics about the harmful effects of salt.

Indeed, many medics (see the comments of Professor Hugh Tunstall-Pedoe in 2, opposite) appeared to believe that Professor MacGregor and other campaigners were exaggerating... or were completely wrong.

The article by Gary Taubes from The New York Times (see 3, opposite) sums up accurately the salt sceptics' arguments.

During the live radio debate, I pointed out to the professor that Italians consumed more salt, yet lived longer, on average, than we Brits do.

Indeed, many of the handful of countries whose inhabitants live longer than we do consume more salt.

His unlikely explanation was that Italian's greater longevity was due to "the Mediterranean diet".

Salt

This was a strange argument, since its logic was that a higher dietary salt content combined with the Mediterranean diet would produce health benefits – contradicting the professor's main thesis.

Incidentally, it's interesting to note that, since our debate, the name of the professor's organisation has been changed, removing the word 'consensus' in its title – as The New York Times' article illustrates, there is no medical consensus on the salt issue.

Despite our scepticism regarding aspects of official health advice, Wetherspoon has, nevertheless, complied with legislation and regulations by reducing the salt and sugar content of its menus, for example, and by publishing the calorie content of each dish, long before it was a legal requirement.

We were also the first pub company to open non-smoking pubs and we called on the then prime minister Tony Blair, in this magazine (see 4, opposite), to ban smoking in all pubs – controversial at the time, but we believe that most smokers today support our stance. Indeed, shortly thereafter, Tony took our advice.

Health

In any event, a cautious approach by the public to any claim of 'consensus' on health issues is surely advisable – so much of the 'official' advice from governments in the last 50 or 60 years has turned out to be wrong.

For example, cheese, eggs and whole milk were, for many decades, regarded as outright dangerous by an almost unanimous (and wrong) 'consensus' among the medical profession of that era.

However, that advice has mostly been rescinded, as the article in the The Daily Telegraph (see 5, opposite) demonstrates.

But the debate moves on.

Now, your pint of Doom Bar or Ruddles or your glass of sauvignon blanc is in the cross hairs of the health lobby.

It is often argued that even one drink is bad for you. See article at 6 (opposite), by Professor Devi Sridhar of Edinburgh University, which reflects a radical modern view that "there is no safe level of drinking" and that "there is a widespread consensus that alcohol poisons our bodies".

This seems to me to be yet another example of an illusory 'consensus' among medics who have lost objectivity.

I'm sure that Jeanne of Arles (see right) would have backed me up on this point...

Of course, Wetherspoon has a conflict of interest in the anti-alcohol debate; so, I beg you, take what I say with a large pinch of salt.

However, the longest-lived nations ALL seem to indulge in a few sherbets, as the list of the top 10 indicates (see 7, opposite).

Astonishingly, they ALL, also, consume more salt than we do (see worldpopulationreview.com).

The Aussies, Irish and Swedes, for example, some of the world's longest-living people, are all notorious guzzlers, yet dominate the list.

The Japanese, generally admired by the health lobby for their good dietary practices, are also partial to a tincture.

As in the salt debate, some very influential medics appear, in my view, to have lost perspective in their arguments.

Among the most prominent is Professor Ian Gilmore, a medic who doggedly opposed Wetherspoon's expansion by lobbying magistrates' courts to refuse our applications for pub licences – although he never succeeded in his objections.

Professor Gilmore is the founder of Alcohol Alliance UK (AHA), whose website classifies alcohol as being, in some respects, 'the same as tobacco and asbestos'. To me, this seems to be a wild overstatement – how does the professor explain the fact that nations with the greatest longevity are invariably enthusiastic drinkers? Or that many, or most, centenarians are drinkers?

Indeed, while doing everything in his power to stop Wetherspoon from opening new pubs, Professor Gilmore, ex-president of the Royal College of Surgeons, advocated the legalisation or 'decriminalisation' of heroin and cocaine – a strange set of priorities, in my view, for what it's worth.

Jeanne of Arles

As a bizarre aside, the longest-ever-lived human being, whose age has been officially verified, was Jeanne Calment of Arles, France (see 8, opposite). Jeanne died at 122, having lived about five years longer than anyone else, before or since – while apparently enjoying a 'port wine' with her meals, having given up smoking at 117.

Jeanne must have been designed specifically to undermine every main theme of popular health advice.

Non-drinking nations do not feature in the top-10 list, although, to be fair, factors such as relative wealth, efficiency of health systems, and so on, are also important in this area.

In conclusion, history suggests that governments and medics, with the best of intentions, often seem to get dietary advice wrong.

As in so many areas where expert opinions are concerned, we need to consider the evidence and make up our own mind.

Wetherspoon News tries to present the arguments. You, the public, will decide.

In the meantime, pour me a pint of Abbot, if you would be so kind...

Tim Martin
Chairman

Tim says: “It’s hard to explain why so much quasi-medical advice in the broad area of diet has proven to be so badly misjudged over many decades. Perhaps it’s because academics and researchers are subconsciously seeking a ‘silver bullet’ to solve all problems – what songwriter Leonard Cohen called “a card so high and wild (they’ll) never need to deal another”. In my view, professors like Graham MacGregor and Ian Gilmore have fallen into this trap – and their fellow medics often dispute their radical views.”

1 Jenny Tucker, The Daily Telegraph, 23 June 2025

WHY OVER-60s SHOULD HAVE FOUR COFFEES A DAY

A new study has examined the link between coffee consumption and a reduced risk of frailty. Can a few daily cups really make us stronger?

It’s no great surprise to any of us that with ageing comes the unavoidable deterioration of our bodies. As the years notch up, we tend to lose muscle mass, vital organs decline, we become slower, weaker and less mentally focused. So it’s inevitable that the stairs seem steeper, the shopping feels heavier, our breath is more sluggish, and a favourite glass and the top shelf of the cupboard becomes frustratingly out of reach. Then there’s the thing we fear more than anything: becoming “frail”.

Professor Tahir Masud, clinical advisor to the Royal Osteoporosis Society (ROS) and a

consultant physician at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, adds: “Health care professionals often refer to frailty as a “lack of physiological reserve”. It can lead to older people being at a higher risk of falls, reduced mobility, and being unable to look after themselves without help. In people suffering from osteoporosis and fragility fractures, frailty can increase the risk of broken bones by increasing the risk of falls...”

Read the rest of this article on page 62.

2 Professor Tunstall-Pedoe, BBC

The late Dr Michael Mosley, writing in 2014 for the BBC, following an interview with Professor Tunstall-Pedoe, summarises his views as follows:

Professor Tunstall-Pedoe “believes that cutting back on salt will do us no harm and might be beneficial, so we should use less, but he doesn’t believe that the scientific case for cutting salt as a direct way of reducing blood pressure has been made. He thinks that the science is controversial and there is not a consensus.”

3 Gary Taubes, The New York Times, 2 June 2012

SALT, WE MISJUDGED YOU

The first time I questioned the conventional wisdom on the nature of a healthy diet, I was in my salad days, almost 40 years ago, and the subject was salt. Researchers were claiming that salt supplementation was unnecessary after strenuous exercise, and this advice was being passed on by health reporters. All I knew was that I had played high school football in suburban Maryland, sweating profusely through double sessions in the swamplike 90-degree days of August...

Read the rest of this article on page 63.

4 Wetherspoon News, autumn 2004

Tim Martin, writing in 2004 in Wetherspoon News, calls on PM Tony Blair to ban smoking in pubs

Ban ciggies, Prime Minister, but just give us a couple of years’ notice to avoid, above all, the chaos of local authorities enforcing local bans, meaning that smokers might migrate from one town or borough to another to light up in public.”

5 Polly Dunbar, The Daily Telegraph, 10 June 2025

WHY MILK, CHEESE (AND EVEN A SMIDGEN OF BUTTER) IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

As a new study finds that including dairy in your diet could help prevent diabetes, here’s what type you should be going for – and how much

Queue for a coffee in your local café and you’ll hear a dizzying array of orders – oat flat whites, almond macchiatos, soya lattes. Increasingly rarely will anyone order a drink made with dairy, which has fallen so far out of fashion that in some circles it’s become a dirty word.

Since the 1970s, our consumption of cow’s milk has halved – from an average of 140 litres per person per year to 70...

Read the rest of this article on page 64.

6 Devi Sridhar, The Guardian, 20 August 2024

BAD NEWS, RED WINE DRINKERS: ALCOHOL IS ONLY EVER BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

We needn’t be puritanical about having a drink, but we can no longer deny that it harms us, even in small quantities

To say yes to that glass of wine or beer, or just get a juice? That’s the question many people face when they’re at after-work drinks, relaxing on a Friday night, or at the supermarket thinking about what to pick up for the weekend. I’m not here to opine on the philosophy of drinking, and how much you should drink is a question only you can answer. But it’s worth highlighting the updated advice from key health authorities on alcohol. Perhaps it will swing you one way or the other...

Read the rest of this article on page 65.

7 Steven Ross Johnson, U.S. News & World Report 13 December 2024

Countries with the longest life expectancy

COUNTRY	AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY
Liechtenstein	84.3 years
Japan	84.0 years
Switzerland	83.5 years
Australia	83.2 years
Sweden	83.1 years
Spain	83.1 years
Ireland	83.1 years
Luxembourg	83.0 years
Italy	82.9 years
Singapore	82.9 years



8 Jeanne Calment of Arles, the longest-lived person in history