



Offer a guiding hand

Patients can benefit from a little push in the right direction, says Nicola Davies

When the health secretary Andrew Lansley declared that the government would be using 'nudges' to change health-related behaviour, what did the majority of people think he meant?

Nudging can be interpreted in two ways: as annoying someone into action or offering a gentle reminder. The debate that followed Mr Lansley's announcement late last year suggested that most people believed the harsher of the definitions was intended.

Nudge theory was conceived by Chicago-based academic Richard Thaler. It gained prominence in the UK in 2008 when David Cameron expressed interest in it. The theory is that people can be encouraged to make healthier lifestyle choices without being nannied or losing freedom of choice.

The essence of nudging

incentives work, so devise encouragements.
Understand patients can make beneficial decisions.
Design health interventions that patients opt out of rather than opt into.
Give feedback by informing patients when they are succeeding or how they might improve.
Expect error and offer relapse prevention strategies.
Structure complex choices by weighing the pros and cons of different options.

For example, a 'nudge' that has been proposed by the government is learner drivers having to opt out of organ donation schemes.

According to the nudge philosophy, nurses are choice architects – people who create health-related choices. Decisions are influenced by the information nurses provide, even by the nurse's facial expression. Nurses can use this influence by constructing choices in ways that make healthy decisions easier for people.

Deeply ingrained unhealthy lifestyle habits are not easy to change. Introducing change often requires an intervention

that will prevent automatic unhealthy behaviours and encourage healthier reflective behaviours. This is where the NUDGES acronym can be helpful (see box).

At the core of the nudges concept is making healthier options more feasible, accessible and appealing. Services can be made more accessible merely by patients being informed of their existence. Healthier eating can be made more appealing if the nutritional advice and information offered suits the person's lifestyle.

Nudging means helping and supporting patients to lead healthier lives. Most nurses do this in their practice already and nudge theory adds legitimacy to many of the influential techniques that they already use **NS**

Nicola Davies is a health psychologist and writer

RESOURCE FILE

- ▶ Cabinet office nudge unit <http://tinyurl.com/nudge-unit>
- ▶ Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008) *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* <http://tinyurl.com/thalersunstein>