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Want to smoke less? Get married

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Giving a whole new meaning to the expression "nanny state," this past week Norwegian cabinet minister Solveig Horne called upon her government to provide incentives for married parents to take a weekly date night; she believes that government intervention is the key to keeping married couples married and is campaigning state funded marriage counseling services.

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Last month, British Prime Minister David Cameron wrote an article for the Daily Mail titled "Marriage is good for Britain - and that's why I'm backing it with a tax break *[about:../../../../../%5C%5Clocalhost%5C%5Bhttp%5C::www.dailymail.co.uk:debate:article-2435723:DAVID-CAMERON-Marriage-good-Britain--thats-Im-backing-tax-break.html%5D]*" in which he made clear his belief that governments have an important role to play in the promotion of marriage; introducing a program that will cost his government over half a billion pounds.

The government of Singapore has for decades considered it part of its mandate to encourage healthy marriages; funding a number of marriage promoting programs including a government run online dating site *[http://app.sdn.sg/]* and matchmaking workshops that train interested citizens on how to encourage friends and family members to marry.

In response to falling marriage rates globally, governments everywhere appear to be going into the business of encouraging their citizen's to get, and stay, married.

Everywhere, it seems, except in Canada where the national marriage rates has fallen by half in the last forty years. New evidence suggests that the Canadian disinterest in interfering in the personal affairs might have a high price tag: higher public spending on health care.

Each year, Canadian taxpayers spend almost four and a half billion dollars on health care for smoking related illnesses. Governments, at all levels, have implemented policies designed to reduce tobacco consumption in the hope of lowering the excess burden placed on the health care system by smokers. So, it should be of interest to note that whether or not a person smokes has a lot to do with whether or not they are married.

New research published this month *[http://paa2009.princeton.edu/papers/91093]*, finds that Canadian men and women who are married are significantly less likely to smoke than their unmarried counterparts, and consume less alcohol as well. Divorced men and women not only smoke more than married men and women, but they smoke even more than unmarried men and women.

Thirty-eight per cent of divorced men smoke, compared to 30 per cent of single men and 20 per cent of married men.

Thirty-two per cent of divorced women smoke, compared to 26 per cent of single women and 15 per cent of married women.

Husbands and wives, it seems, discourage each other from behaving in a way that is bad for their health suggesting that the more people who are married, and stay that way, the healthier we will be as a population.

There are some costs associated with being married. Both married men and women are more likely to be overweight or obese compared to those who are single. This is likely because married individuals spend more time working and exercise less frequently.

If you had asked me at the beginning of the millennium to predict the future of tobacco consumption, I would have guessed that by now it would be almost completely eradicated. But that is hardly the case. One possible explanation for the persistence of smoking is that while society may be increasing the pressure on smokers to stop, fewer and fewer people have a person at home who is asking the same.

Perhaps the next policy that is need to reduce smoking is not higher taxes or more smoking bans, it could be a policy that encourages us to find someone who cares.

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