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The rise and fall of the world's first fat tax

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, Denmark introduced the world's first tax on saturated fat, but only 15 months later the fat tax was abolished. The aim of this article is to investigate the political processes surrounding the implementation and rapid abolition of the fat tax. Our findings suggest that industry and trade associations were heavily involved in the political process of formulating the fat tax. Industry representatives used certain tactics to oppose the fat tax: threatening lawsuits, predicting welfare losses, casting doubt on evidence, diverting focus and requesting postponement. After the fat tax was implemented, the food industry continued their opposition through intensified lobbying and juridical actions at EU level. However, other factors seem to have contributed to the fall of the fat tax. The tax received criticism for being poorly designed and gradually lost popularity among health professionals, politicians and the public. In the end, the fat tax was abolished for financial reasons. This study demonstrates how politicians considered the fat tax as a funding source rather than a public health initiative, which resulted in significant shortcomings. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the massive influence by industry stakeholders was not balanced with inputs from public health professionals, who should assume a more proactive role in policy-making.

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1. Introduction

During the last few decades, there has been a substantial increase in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) worldwide. Causing 36 million deaths annually, corresponding to two thirds of all deaths, NCDs are now the world's leading cause of death [1]. At the 2013 WHO Europe Ministerial Conference on Nutrition and Non-communicable Diseases, WHO Director-General, Dr. Margaret Chan made an appeal for policy-makers to direct their focus towards big industries such as the food and soda industries [2]. This

statement follows from several recent examples of how the food industry systematically opposes regulation by using certain tactics, e.g. filing lawsuits, supplying governments with industry-funded biased research and lobbying [3–6]. A recent example is the European Union (EU) regulation on mandatory nutrition labelling, which gave rise to a massive lobbying campaign by FoodDrinkEurope at an estimated value of USD 1.4 billion, which was successful in averting traffic light labelling in favour of the less restrictive guideline daily amount (GDA) labelling [7,8].

Several scholars have argued that governments should refrain from collaborating with the food industry and instead increase regulation by means of food taxes [9,10]. Although reviews tend to conclude that food taxes are effective in lowering the intake of unhealthy foods [11,12], studies that specifically assess the health effects of such taxes are more contradictory. Some modelling studies predict that food taxes can decrease the prevalence of

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ischaemic heart disease and diet-related cancers [13,14]. Other studies, on the contrary, predict that they will increase morbidity and mortality from these diseases due to adverse substitution effects, i.e. that consumers substitute taxed foods with foods that are more unhealthy [15,16]. Despite these inconsistencies, several European countries have introduced excise taxes on unhealthy foodstuffs and beverages, including Finland, Hungary and France [17]. In October 2011, Denmark took the lead in introducing the world's first tax on saturated fat. After only 15 months, however, the fat tax was abolished.

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the political processes that led to the introduction of the fat tax as well as its rapid abolition, with a special focus on the influence of food industry and trade associations.

2. Materials and methods

The study is based on textual analysis of political documents related to the fat tax. Policy documents were retrieved via the official website of the Danish Parliament. Search words were “fedtskat” and “fedtafgift” (both Danish expressions of fat tax). This resulted in 95 hits for the period before the introduction of the fat tax (January 2007–October 2011) and 32 hits for the period in which the fat tax was in effect (October 2011–January 2013). Documents included bills, proposals for parliamentary resolution, legal texts, transcripts of Chamber debates, consultation responses from stakeholders and

various appendices. To supplement the relatively few policy documents covering the period between the fat tax' passage in Parliament to its abolition, we performed a media search restricted to this period in the five largest national newspapers using the same search words. This resulted in 53 hits. Finally, using the same search words and covering the same period, we performed a broad Google search to identify webpages, reports etc. drawn up by industry stakeholders. References for policy documents, newspaper articles, webpages etc. used for analysis are listed in Appendix 1 and are referred to in the text by Roman numerals.

After thoroughly scrutinizing all documents and organizing them chronologically as well as thematically, a political timeline illustrating the main determining events and factors in the political process was compiled. This enabled us to structure our analysis into different phases of the fat tax's introduction and abolition, which informs the structure of the results section. All identified documents were then thoroughly scrutinized with the aim of identifying how the fat tax was formed and introduced and later abolished, including which actors were involved, which arguments they used and which evidence they used to support them. As we had a special interest in the influence of food industry and trade associations in the political processes, particular attention was paid to the formal consultation responses put forward by industry stakeholders, as these documents constitute important channels for industries to affect policy development. Consultation

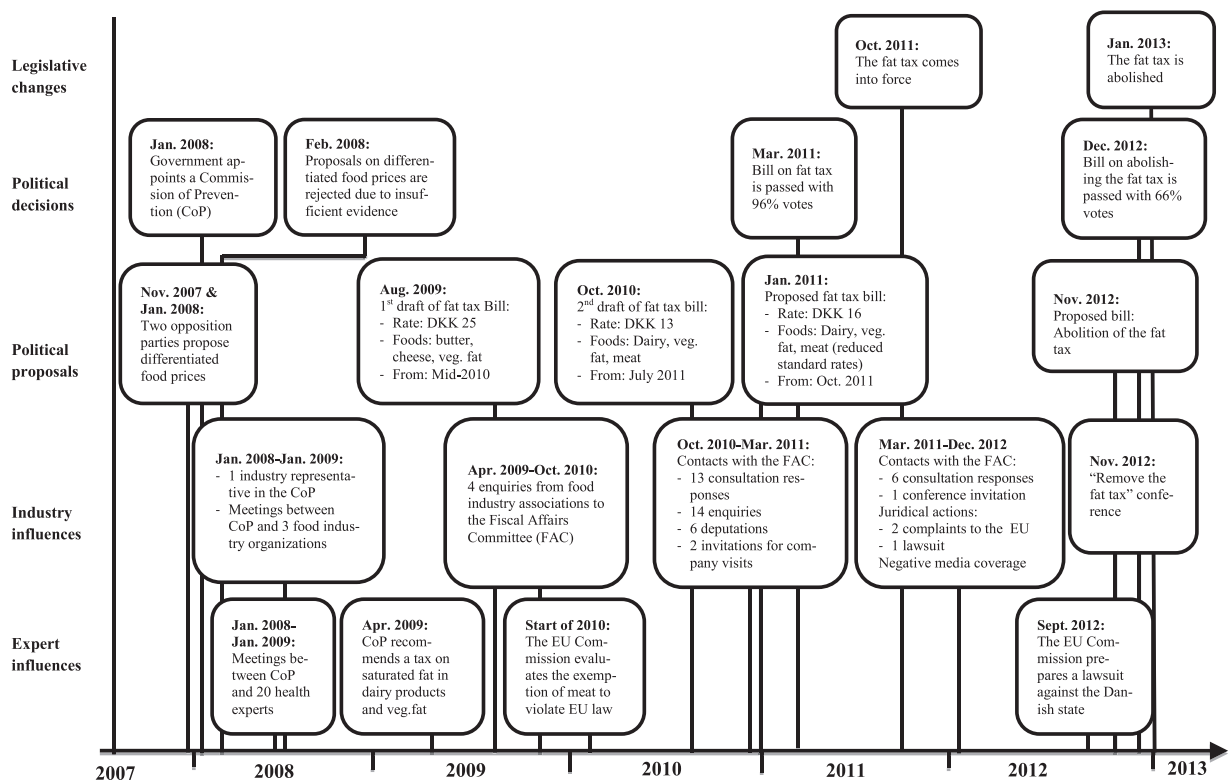


Fig. 1. Political timeline.

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