

A few years ago, I went to the supermarket with a friend. She went rushing around the aisles collecting ingredients for dinner and chucking a few other essentials in as she went, including several packets of paracetamol. Then, when we got to the till, she threw one of the packets to me, asking if I would mind paying for it.

I was a bit confused at the time, but I dutifully caught them, found a pound in my pocket and went through the checkout after her. Later, I expressed my curiosity about why she hadn't added those tablets to the rest of her purchases on her debit card. That was when I first learned that paracetamol are subject to legislation that restricts the number of tablets that one person can buy. This law is intended to prevent us overdosing on paracetamol and therefore I feel it may be important to mention that my friend only took two that evening and had simply wanted to stock up because she suspected that a few days in bed might be on the cards.

From Tablets to Tea...

Another woman I know, after talking to her midwife, went to her local health food shop in an attempt to buy some red raspberry leaf tea. The assistant refused to sell her this, on the basis that she was pregnant and because, according to the assistant, red raspberry leaf tea might make her go into labour. In fact, at 41 and a half weeks and preparing for a battle over medical induction, this was exactly what she was hoping for, but, as you will probably understand, at 41 and a half weeks and preparing for a battle over medical induction she didn't have enough energy left to argue. Instead, like my friend of supermarket fame, she found the most obvious way around it and waited outside the shop until she saw a kindly looking (and non-pregnant) lady who agreed to go in and buy the tea for her.

Now I don't know about you, but I can't help but wonder at the fineness of the line between the retail precautions which really make sense (like not selling fireworks or sharp knives to 6 year-olds) and those which seem to some as further evidence that we are living in what has become known as 'the Nanny State'. Are we, as consumers, assumed to be so thoroughly lacking in common sense that we have to be policed to this extent? More importantly, however (because I do sort of get the paracetamol thing given the horrible consequences of eating too many in one go and the fact that there is some evidence to support this) where is the policing of pregnant women going to end?

In-flight Policing

The final straw that made me write this article occurred when I was on a long-haul flight a few weeks back. A flight attendant refused to serve me a glass of wine and then loudly told me off for asking for it because she (wrongly) thought I was pregnant. I am not the least bit concerned that she thought I was pregnant, by the way; I am happily round, I was wearing a baggy dress for comfort, and, having managed to talk myself into one of those nice comfy business class seats, I was reclined upon it in a manner reminiscent of one of those whales that throws themselves onto the beach in order to get on the telly. What I was really bothered about was the fact that the flight attendant felt she had the right to deny alcohol to pregnant women. And, yes, I know all about fetal alcohol syndrome and I'm not suggesting we all start running antenatal groups down the pub or anything, but surely a pregnant woman has the right to have the odd glass of wine without being reprimanded by a stranger?

Airline attendants apart (because, on a 747, you're a pretty captive audience) the thing that really gets me about these kinds of decisions is how very easy it is to circumvent them. Find a mate, or a kindly-looking lady, and you can buy enough raspberry leaves or tablets to open your own shop with. (In fact, I'm almost tempted to take a load of friends and go and buy 200 paracetamol, just to thumb my nose at the rules. The only trouble is, at the rate that we use painkillers in our house, I calculated that it would take about 66.7 years to get through them, and there's probably another law that says I mustn't eat out-of-date pills in case I explode and make a mess or something...) Which makes me wonder if the inevitable consequence of the Nanny State is going to be a black market in red raspberry leaf tea, or whether it is actually possible that, one day, things will become so ridiculous that the women of the world will all simply refuse to play any longer?