Smoking, alcoholism, and use of illicit drugs are addictions that are increasingly studied by economists. The health habit of overeating resulting in obesity will also be viewed as similar to an addiction in this class. This class will study economic and policy issues relating to these four addictions or health habits. We will focus on establishing the causes of and solutions to problems. Specifically, the class will cover: 1) models of substance use including supply and demand, rational addiction and behavioral economics models, 2) perspectives on whether, why and how the government should intervene in these health decisions, 3) facts and findings from the literature on each addiction, and 4) evaluation of public policies related to each substance. We will draw from and examine a number of different methods of determining causes of problems e.g., econometrics as applied to population-based data as well as quasi-experimental and experimental methods. Public policy issues to discuss include: how to address alcohol misuse at colleges; optimal taxes on alcohol, cigarettes and soda; legalization or decriminalization of currently illicit drugs; smoking bans as a precommitment device; the cause of and solution to rising international obesity rates; paying people for good habits; and globalization and the international drug problem. This course will be a seminar restricted to about 20 students. Students in the Public Health Masters program and seniors majoring in Economics will comprise most of the class.

The course is aimed at being challenging and thought-provoking and applied to policy. A focus will be on discussion and debates. Often there is not a single right answer but different sides of the issue need to be understood.

There will be short bi-weekly assignments and a longer paper accompanied by a short in-class presentation. Class discussion is integral to the learning process and will be part of student evaluations. You must come to class prepared!

The required paper offers an opportunity to think analytically and creatively and to pursue a research topic of your choice. Each student will select a topic to investigate in more depth and will write a paper and make a brief presentation on the paper. A list of potential paper topics will be provided. One assignment requires you to propose different potential topics and to get feedback prior to writing the full paper. This helps you to make a good topic choice.

Prerequisite: Microeconomics.

[Also HPA 590b]

Undergrad Course Category: Health
Public