

COMMENTARY

Preventing tobacco companies from advertising using their packaging could be an important component of comprehensive tobacco control: A commentary on Australia's plain packaging of cigarettes

Policy decisions always have to be made on the basis of *judgement* about the effects of those decisions. Contextual factors and lack of the opportunity to undertake controlled experiments mean that one can never predict with certainty what the effect will be. Given what we know about factors that contribute to motivation to take up smoking and relapse following attempts at quitting and the burgeoning evidence on plain packaging specifically [1], it would be surprising if introduction of 'plain packaging' did not have an important effect in reducing smoking prevalence. But we cannot be sure and that is why the rest of the world will be interested to see what happens in Australia. It is a policy move that the English Department of Health is actively considering and it will look to Australia for clues as to what effects it might have here. This is important because we are experiencing stagnation in the downward trajectory of smoking prevalence [2].

The argument being put forward by the tobacco industry and its apologists that there is insufficient evidence that this measure will affect smoking prevalence to offset the potential adverse impact on international trade lacks credibility. It is worth remembering that for decades the tobacco industry claimed that there was insufficient evidence that smoking damaged health when their internal documents showed that they were fully aware of the harm their products were causing and how addictive they were. There can be little doubt that industry concern that the policy will reduce smoking is the reason it is making such a fuss.

When faced with the tobacco industry whingeing about the unfairness of this or any other policy, it is worth remembering that (to use the bluntness for which Australians are rightly proud) they are 'bloody lucky' to be allowed to trade in their deadly, addictive products at all!

Having said that, it is worth reminding ourselves of the full range of policy options that one can use to reduce smoking prevalence so that we can see that there are many more things that countries can and should be doing to put 'big tobacco' out of business and reduce

the appalling burden they place on society (for a review see [3]). A comprehensive list of categories for behaviour change interventions was recently published that may provide a framework for this [4]:

Education (imparting knowledge or understanding): There are still large gaps in public and professional awareness of what are the most effective methods of stopping smoking, the importance of quitting as young as possible and not leaving it until one is starting to experience symptoms [5].

Persuasion (influencing desire in ways that go beyond education, e.g. imagery): There is good evidence that hard-hitting campaigns can have an immediate impact but the effect is short-lived and so they need to be sustained [5]. Events such as No Smoking Day are also effective and highly cost-effective [6] and there may be scope for having more than one per year. Evidence strongly suggests that offer of help with quitting by general practitioners is more effective in prompting quit attempts than merely advising smokers to stop [7].

Incentivisation (e.g. financial rewards): There is good evidence for a benefit of using vouchers to promote cessation in pregnant smokers and this could be adopted more widely [8].

Coercion (in the broad sense of introducing a personal or financial cost for failure to comply as in raising taxes on cigarettes): This remains a powerful tool when used in combination with other measures [5] and it is important to maintain the upward pressure on price and to minimise the options for trading down and use of illicit tobacco. It is also a policy lever that smokers themselves are happy to see implemented [5].

Training (imparting skills): Training children in refusal skills has been tried with limited success, but training smokers in self-regulatory skills to help them remain abstinent is a topic that may well be worth exploring [5].

Environmental restructuring (e.g. removing vending machines, banning point-of-sale advertising): One of the ways that nicotine drives smoking is through the associations it fosters between the activity and the

situations in which the activity occurs. Much more can be done to remove smoking cues from the environment, including ensuring that young people are not exposed to smoking in films [5].

Regulation (creating rules governing the behaviour): Smoking restrictions have proved effective in protecting non-smokers and there is evidence that in some jurisdictions it has probably helped reduce smoking prevalence. These restrictions could be extended as long as the public was convinced it was appropriate and ethical [5].

Enablement (e.g. behavioural support/counselling, medication): Medications and behavioural support are effective but are still not widely used. When medication is used it is often used in a way as to render it ineffective. There is considerable scope for improving usage of the most effective methods of quitting [5,7].

In this context, introduction of plain packaging is clearly just one part of the picture. The Australian government is blazing a trail in implementing it. Objections on the part of the tobacco industry must be seen in the light of the fact that for governments even to allow the manufacture and sale of a lethal and addictive product is an anachronism and dereliction of their duty of care. So to remove opportunities for the tobacco industry to make such a harmful product attractive to children and adults is a very small ethical step towards sanity. The rest of the world awaits the effects with considerable interest and that will help determine how much effort and resource to devote to it in the light of the other things they could be doing.

Declaration concerning interests

R. W. undertakes research and consultancy for companies that manufacture and market smoking cessation

medications. He also has a share of a patent for a novel nicotine delivery device.

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