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Examples of plain tobacco packaging
Credit: Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

Factsheet 4.

Tobacco labelling and packaging

04

Labelling provides important information on the health risks of smoking

Most smokers are unaware of the specific harms caused by tobacco use and underestimate risks to themselves and others.[2] Smokers have little knowledge about tobacco products' ingredients and have been misled by the so-called 'low-tar' or 'light' product lines of a brand. Instead of quitting smokers may switch to these misleadingly named products.

Effective health warnings and disclosure of ingredients and emissions motivate smokers to quit. They also discourage non-smokers from starting smoking.[3]

New tobacco control laws are steadily increasing the size and strength of pack warnings.[4] However, many countries still lack effective tobacco pack warnings, and some have none at all.[2] Weak warnings are small, offer general information, do not feature images and are not in a local language.

Graphic health warnings vastly increase the impact of a message, and are vital for communicating with young people and those with low literacy levels.[5] In several low- and middle-income countries pictorial pack warnings are one of the few sources of information about the health risks of tobacco use.[2 6] Warnings should be large, covering at least half of the display area on all main faces of the pack, and use a variety of messages including references to specific diseases caused by tobacco.[7]

Status of tobacco package health warnings

As of 2012, 63 countries have finalised picture warning requirements - covering more than 40% of the world's population.[8] 47 countries/jurisdictions have warnings covering at least 50% of the package front and back and 18 countries/jurisdictions had warnings covering more than 50% of the package front and back.[8] However, about 40% of countries, including nearly 60% of low-income countries, still have not implemented any warning label policies or require only small warnings that cover less than 30% of the package.

Key Facts

- Effective health warnings on tobacco packs encourage smokers to quit and discourage non-smokers from starting.
- Smokers tend to underestimate the health risks of tobacco use.
- Effective health warnings include large shocking pictures and strong clear language.
- Health warnings can be implemented at minimal cost to the government and have greater support than most other tobacco control interventions.[1]
- Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control [WHO FCTC] requires parties to implement strong pack warnings and to ban the use of misleading descriptors such as 'low tar', 'light', and 'mild'.

Health warnings work

Pictorial warnings have been very effective and their impact has been similar across many countries. For example:[10][11]

- In Canada more than one quarter of smokers said the warnings motivated them to smoke outdoors in order to protect their families from exposure to second-hand smoke.[11]
- In Brazil two thirds of smokers said the warnings made them want to quit.[12]
- In Singapore 71% of smokers said they knew more about the health effects of smoking because of the warnings.[13]
- In Thailand, after new graphic warnings covering the top 50% of the cigarette pack were introduced in 2006, the percentage of people thinking about the health risks from tobacco and about quitting increased.[6]

Plain packaging works

As of December 2012, Australia became the first country to require plain (or generic) packaging of all tobacco products. Brand logos and colours have been banned and replaced with a drab brown background and identical fonts noting only the brand and product type. This law also increased the size of graphic health warnings, to cover 75% of the front and 90% of the back of packs. Additional text warnings and the national quit-line number must appear on package sides. Misleading product descriptors such as "light" and "mild" are prohibited. Several other countries including Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, India and France are now considering similar legislation.[14]

Following the introduction of plain packaging in Australia, smoking rates fell at their fastest pace in more than two decades.[15]

The tobacco industry challenged the new law in Australia's High Court, arguing that the legislation infringed its intellectual property rights by "unjustly acquiring" tobacco company trademarks. The Australian High Court ruled against these claims in August 2012, but litigation continues in international trade courts. Because restrictions on tobacco advertising are increasing across the globe, tobacco packaging could be seen as the final platform for the industry to market these products.

WHO FCTC requirements

Under Article 11 of the WHO FCTC, parties must implement a series of warnings in the country's main languages, recommended to cover at least 50% of the main display areas.[16] The guidelines recommend that graphic warnings cover as much of the pack surface as possible, and they also recommend plain packaging.

Best practice

- Include graphic images to accompany messages in text.
- Include a series of text and graphical images in the country's main languages.
- Ensure the health warnings cover at least 50% of the main faces.
- Use clear, simple, specific and strong text and images specified by the government.
- Require the disclosure of the constituents of tobacco products and tobacco smoke, but not the quantities.
- Ban the use of misleading terms such as 'light' or 'mild'. Ban any design elements that suggest these terms.
- Ensure that labelling laws do not protect tobacco manufacturers from liability for the risks caused by use of their products.
- Place a duty on the sellers of tobacco products to not sell packages that do not comply with labelling requirements.

Parties should also consider requiring plain packaging i.e. brand names and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style. This may make the pack warnings more noticeable. They should also monitor the implementation and evaluate the impact of the packaging and labelling measures in order to identify improvements that are needed.

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