



Support for Amendments to Health Warnings on Tobacco Product Packets and Retail Containers

The University of Hong Kong School of Public Health strongly supports the captioned amendments, which include increasing the size of health warnings to cover 85% of the largest two sides of cigarette packets, and increasing the number of graphic health warnings from 6 to 12, etc.

We have conducted major research studies on the harms of smoking and exposure to tobacco smoke, public opinions towards tobacco control measures, and tobacco use in children and adolescents. Various tobacco control measures in Hong Kong such as raising excise tax, banning advertising, restricting smoking in public places, and displaying health warnings on cigarette packets have reduced the smoking prevalence (daily smoking of people aged 15 or above) from 23.3% in the early 1980s to 10.5% in 2015, showing that those measures were effective. However, the decline has slowed down in recent years and 1 in 4 children are still exposed to secondhand smoke at home. Stronger measures are needed to further reduce smoking and the harms it poses on smokers and non-smokers.

Our strong support for the amendments is evidence-based:

1. Smoking kills 1 in 2 users, possibly 2 in 3 if started young. Reducing smoking prevalence will save thousands of lives, particularly those of today's young people.
2. Health warnings on cigarette packets are a major source for communicating the risks of tobacco use to smokers.
3. 74% of children and 70% of adolescents in Hong Kong saw tobacco product displays in retail stores in the past 7 days in 2014-15.
4. 20% of children and adolescents in Hong Kong saw their parents' cigarette packets at home in the past 3 months in 2014-15.
5. Local and overseas studies found the proposed amendments effective in:
 - a. Raising awareness of the harms of smoking
 - b. Reducing the attractiveness of tobacco products
 - c. Deterring smoking initiation in young people
 - d. Promoting smoking cessation
 - e. Reducing smoking prevalence and tobacco consumption
6. Local public opinion supported enlarging health warnings on cigarette packets and using more threatening pictures that alternate regularly.
7. These amendments are consistent with the recommendations by the World Health Organisation. Hong Kong is obliged to implement tobacco control measures stipulated in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which was ratified by China.

These amendments will likely have the following specific effects:

1. Smokers will be more aware of the harms of smoking.
2. Children with smoking parents will find smoking less attractive.
3. Smokefree social norms will strengthen.
4. Use of quit line 1833183 and smoking cessation services will increase.
5. Tobacco use will decrease.
6. Smoking prevalence will decrease.

The following are myths about these amendments and our clarifications:

Myth 1. These amendments will lead to an increase in smoking prevalence.

Clarifications: This is impossible and not supported by evidence.

Changes in smoking prevalence depends on several major factors:

- Smoking initiation in never smokers
- Relapsing in former smokers
- Smoking cessation of current smokers

Available evidence has shown that larger health warnings will deter smoking initiation and promote smoking cessation, resulting in a decrease in smoking prevalence. It would be inexplicable that larger graphic illustrations of the harms of smoking on cigarette packets will promote smoking in smokers and non-smokers. While evaluating the effect of tobacco control measures, it is also important to use consistent survey methods and to allow sufficient time for the anticipated effects to take place.

Myth 2. These amendments will lead to an increase in illicit trade of cigarettes.

Clarifications: This is an unfounded speculation not supported by available research evidence from Australia, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Enlarging health warnings on cigarette packets is not intended to make it more or less difficult to counterfeit, but tobacco companies have a tradition of denying the harms of smoking and opposing government control measures with arguments relevant or not. The tobacco industry's aim is to divert attention and erode support for those measures by exaggerating the market share of illicit cigarettes and the resulting fiscal loss. We have reported that the industry-funded estimate of illicit cigarette consumption in 2012 was inflated by 133–337%. The industry had also threatened that any increase in tobacco tax would fuel illicit trade, and turning restaurants smokefree would hurt business, which have all proved wrong. The well-known "Scream test" suggests that the stronger the opposition by tobacco companies to a control measure, the more effective it is. The high-profile legal challenges that tobacco companies launched and lost in Australia and other countries therefore suggest that the proposed amendments are indeed effective.

Conclusions

Enlarging the health warnings on tobacco packet products and other proposed amendments are effective, evidence-based and recommended by the World Health Organisation. These measures are urgently needed to further reduce the smoking prevalence and save thousands of lives, especially those of young people, including smokers and non-smokers exposed to tobacco smoke. On behalf of the University of Hong Kong School of Public Health, I urge all legislators to support these amendments, which are also supported by the public and are easy to implement and enforce. Failing this will be a terrible setback to tobacco control in Hong Kong and send a bad message that legislators are not after the best interest of the public's health.

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10 January 2017