

**Testing New Health Warning Messages  
for Cigarette Packages:  
A Summary of Three Phases  
of Focus Group Research**

**Final Report**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.0 INTRODUCTORY TOPICS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Awareness of Health Risks of Smoking.....	4
2.2 Awareness and Recall of Current Warning Messages.....	4
2.3 Support for and Perceived Impact of Warning Messages.....	5
<b>3.0 NEW WARNING MESSAGES.....</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1 Overall Response to New Warning Messages.....	5
3.2 Responses to Specific Warning Messages.....	6
A. Messages About Children .....	6
B. Messages About Disease, Death and Cessation .....	12
C. Messages About the Environmental Effects of Tobacco .....	30
D. Messages About Addiction .....	35
E. Other Messages .....	37
<b>4.0 FLIP AND SLIDE MESSAGES - THE CONCEPT AND CONTENT .....</b>	<b>39</b>

### *Appendices*

Discussion Agendas  
Health Warning Messages Tested

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In September 1999 Environics Research Group Limited was retained by Health Canada to conduct a series of focus groups to test new health warning messages and graphics to be placed on cigarette packages. A total of 67 messages and graphics were tested in 35 focus group sessions across the country.

In all sessions, participants were asked about their awareness of the health risks of smoking, their awareness of current warning labels on cigarette packages, their overall reaction to new health warning messages, and their rating of specific warning messages.

The focus groups were mainly composed of smokers, including "potential quitters" and "staunch smokers". The participants included a cross-section of age groups, including youth smokers and potential smokers. The research involved three phases as described below.

This report summarizes the findings of all three phases of the research. Appended to the report are copies of the discussion agendas as well as copies of the messages tested in the three phases of research. The original messages were tested in colour; the appendix copies are reproduced in black and white.

### **Phase I**

The first phase of the research consisted of a series of nineteen focus groups, including six groups in both Toronto and Montreal, three groups in Winnipeg and four groups in St. John's, NF. The focus groups were conducted in early October 1999.

The groups included a broad cross-section of age groups (i.e.: 13-14 year olds, 15-16 year olds, 17-19 year olds, 20 to 30 year olds and those 31 year of age and over). The 13 to 16 year-olds included a mixture of smokers and potential smokers. The older groups were composed entirely of smokers, some of whom were deemed to be potential quitters and some of whom were classified as staunch smokers with no plans to quit.

A total of 18 new health warning messages were tested in this phase of the research.

### **Phase II**

The second phase of the research involved a series of ten focus groups, including two groups in Toronto and four groups in each of Halifax and Montreal. The focus groups were completed in late October 1999.

The groups included a broad cross-section of age groups (i.e.: 13-14 year olds, 15-16 year olds, 17-19 year olds, 20 to 30 year olds and those 31 year of age and over). The 13 to 16 year-olds included a mixture of smokers and potential smokers. The older groups were composed entirely of smokers, including potential quitters and staunch smokers.

The second phase involved the testing of a total of 29 new health warning messages.

### **Phase III**

The third phase involved six focus group sessions, including four in Toronto and two in Montreal. The focus groups were held on December 15 and 16, 1999.

The Toronto sessions included one with smokers age 17 to 19, one with potential quitters age 20 to 30, and two with potential quitters age 30 and older. The Montreal sessions included one each with potential quitters age 20 to 30, and age 30 and older.

In the third phase, a total of 20 proposed new warning messages for cigarette packages were tested. In addition, the research tested the concept of including messages on the flip and slide portions of cigarette packages, as well as the content of a total of 11 cessation and health information messages that might be used on the slide.

## **2.0 INTRODUCTORY TOPICS**

### **2.1 Awareness of Health Risks of Smoking**

There was widespread broad general awareness of the health risks of smoking. Participants mentioned cancer, heart disease, emphysema and others. Many also mentioned shortness of breath, the impact of smoking on the fetus and the impact of smoking on ones appearance (i.e., wrinkles, yellow fingers and teeth).

### **2.2 Awareness and Recall of Current Warning Messages**

There was widespread awareness of current health warning labels on cigarette packages.

Most participants recalled specific warning messages, such as smoking can kill you, smoking causes cancer and smoking during pregnancy can affect the health of or harm your child. Some also recalled messages about the addictive nature of smoking. Others were mentioned less frequently.

## **2.3 Support for and Perceived Impact of Warning Messages**

The vast majority of participants thought that cigarette packages should include health warnings. Even some of the most staunch smokers took the view that warning messages were acceptable.

However, many were sceptical about the impact of such messages, and many felt that current warning messages have little impact when it comes to getting smokers to quit. Some participants, mainly younger people, were critical of how "drab and repetitive" the current messages are. A number of participants also remarked that the current messages may have had some impact when they were new, but have lost their impact over time.

On the positive side, participants felt that warning messages do play a role in providing a reminder to smokers about the damage they are doing to their health, and that they may play a role in discouraging smokers from starting and in motivating smokers who have already decided to quit that they should follow through.

## **3.0 NEW WARNING MESSAGES**

### **3.1 Overall Response to New Warning Messages**

Participants were presented with a number of possible new health warning labels that could appear on cigarette packages. After looking through the selection of messages tested in their particular phase of the research, they were asked for their overall impression of these messages.

Most participants felt that the new larger health warning messages, featuring colour photographs, were a definite improvement over the current warning messages. Teenagers were particularly impressed with the use of pictures and the larger size of the messages that allow for the dissemination of more information. Most participants were moved by the dramatic and scary pictures and messages, such as the woman smoking through a hole in her throat, the sick baby, the cemetery with grieving loved ones, and warnings that depicted the physical and health consequences of smoking, such as the diseased mouth. The consensus was that the approach taken was good and was an improvement over the status quo.

Some participants were sceptical as to how much of a difference such messages would make in reducing the smoking rate. However, most participants felt that the messages showed valuable information and that they could have an impact

on certain populations, such as pregnant women smokers, teens thinking of starting to smoke, those thinking of quitting and other groups of smokers.

### **3.2 Responses to Specific Warning Messages**

Each new warning message included a designated Health Canada number, beginning with a letter (ex., C2, D12, etc.). In addition, Environics assigned a single number (ex., #1) for purposes of testing and for the convenience of focus group participants. In the description below, both numbers are recorded; first the Health Canada number and then the Environics number. In the appendix, the Environics numbers are most easily visible, and the messages are ordered according to these numbers.

#### **A. Messages About Children**

A total of 16 warnings involved messages about the effects of smoking on children, designated with a C code by Health Canada.

The consensus from the focus groups was that these messages would be effective with certain segments of the population. Among adults, especially adult women, messages about the impact of smoking on children were sobering and disturbing. Men and teens were more likely to feel that these messages would have an impact only on those with small children. However, the messages made many smokers more sensitive to the idea that their smoking is not only harming themselves, but also their families.

### ***C2 "Tobacco Smoke Kills Babies" (empty crib) #1***

This message received mixed comments. It was seen by most participants to be directed at the relatively small population of people with new-born infants. It was also seen as having a greater impact in encouraging people to smoke away from their babies than in encouraging people to stop smoking altogether.

Most adults had heard of SIDS, but the fact that second hand smoke could cause it was new information to many people. In fact, there was considerable scepticism about smoking being a causal factor of SIDS, with many expressing the view that "nobody knows what causes crib death". Some felt that the line "Smoke Kills Babies" was a bit "over the top" in describing a rare disease that is by no means exclusively caused by smoking. At the same time, many people thought it was important to make the point that smoke must be kept away from babies.

The picture of the crib was seen to be weak compared to another version of the message showing a baby surrounded by smoke. A few people thought the sight of an empty crib was "sad", but many people had to look hard to see that the crib was empty and therefore did not always pick up the symbolism of the picture.

### ***C4 "Tobacco Smoke Kills Babies" (baby surrounded by smoke) #13***

Comments on the message itself regarding SIDS were the same as above. The picture showing the baby surrounded by smoke and in obvious discomfort was seen to be more effective. It was clear what the message was and it also shows an image of a suffering baby that no one wanted to see. Teens, for obvious reasons, thought that this was not very relevant to them as none of them had children or babies. Also, most teens do not know what SIDS is.

### ***C3 "Smoking Kills Babies" (pregnant woman) #10***

This message included the same picture as C9 but a different text.

This message, featuring a picture of an obviously pregnant woman, had the usual mixed comments that were observed with regard to all the messages dealing with babies and pregnancy. Teens, and to a lesser extent men, were less likely than women to say that this had an impact on them.

At the same time, the visual image elicited a degree of anger and repulsion from a number of participants, who were upset with the "don't give a damn" attitude of the woman in the picture. Some men, in particular, said that the sight of a pregnant woman smoking made them feel angry and that if they saw a pregnant

woman in real life smoking they would be tempted to say something to her. Some women commented that pregnant women almost never smoke anymore anyway, since it is common knowledge that it is bad for the fetus. Other women confessed that they had smoked during their pregnancy and that this picture made them feel guilty about it. It is notable that a number of women who had smoked while pregnant said that they were discreet about it and avoided doing it in public since they felt that people would react to them with hostility. Some women mentioned that they had been told by their doctor that if they already smoked heavily they should NOT quit smoking while pregnant since it could be “too much of a shock to their system” and could be worse for the baby than simply continuing to smoke.

### ***C12 “Smoking Hurts Babies” (baby attached to tubes) #25***

This warning message with a picture showing a sick baby with tubes stuck into it was successful. A number of participants thought that this was the most shocking image in the series of messages they were shown, but a handful of participants, particularly in Montreal, thought that the picture was “going too far”. Most thought this was a powerful, graphic image that would make them want to avoid any package with that message on it, or at least hide it from people. The text about smoking during pregnancy was also considered to be well-known but worth reiterating. It was notable that this message, mainly because of its powerful visual image, seemed to have an impact on everyone, not just women of child-bearing age.

### ***C6a “Your Baby Could be Born Addicted to Nicotine” (crying baby near smoke) #16***

This message was seen as being “narrow-cast” to pregnant women. Some women mentioned that this reminded them that they will quit when they become pregnant and that hopefully they will quit smoking permanently at that point.

The idea that a smoker can damage a child that never chose to be a smoker is a powerful image. The problem with this message was that few had heard of the phenomenon of a baby being born with addiction to nicotine. There was some sense that this may be similar to fetal alcohol syndrome or babies being born addicted to crack cocaine, but, for the most part, few knew what it meant for a baby to be born addicted to nicotine. Many participants had parents who smoked when they were young and wondered what impact it could have had on them.

### ***C9 “When You Smoke, So Does Your Baby” (pregnant woman) #49***

This message had the same picture as C3 but a different text.



The message was viewed by most participants as being very good and effective. As noted above, the picture was particularly powerful. "What is she doing?", "definitely good", "she looks like she doesn't care" and "picture makes me sick", were some of the comments. Some participants felt the entire message was limited in its appeal to certain groups of people, particularly women in general or pregnant women in particular.

***C8 "Smoking Poisons Children" (girl coughing surrounded by smoke) #22***

This was seen to be among the most effective of all the warning messages on this topic. Many participants found the picture of the little girl coughing to be poignant and one that would make people feel guilty about smoking around their own children or around children in general. The information about children breathing faster and getting higher concentrations of second-hand smoke was new information to almost everyone and was felt to be believable. Even some teens, while too young to have children, commented that this was a particularly unpleasant and sad image. Adults, once again, felt that parents seeing this would feel guilty and that children themselves could read the message and start hassling their parents.

***C10 "Don't Poison Us" (two smiling boys) #23***

This warning message received a mixed assessment. Many participants could not understand why a message would show healthy happy children, when the message paints such a grim picture of the chemicals and carcinogens in cigarette smoke. Only a couple of participants, in Toronto, liked the idea of showing innocent, happy children under threat.

The information, on the other hand, was seen to be informative. Most found the list of chemicals to be scary and effective. The very fact that people don't always know what these chemicals are was seen as something that made them even scarier.

***C13 "Tobacco Smoke Harms Children" (boy holding his ears near a man smoking) #26***

Many participants found this message to be somewhat quixotic. The text information about smoking causing pneumonia and ear infections among children was seen to be good new information that many did not already know. However, the picture was a bit problematic. Once people read the text and looked carefully at the picture, they understood that the girl in the picture had her hands over her ears because of the pain of an ear infection. However, many

felt that this picture looked more like a poster about child abuse because it looked like the girl was covering her ears as she was being verbally abused.

***C22 "Give Your Kids A Chance" (a smiling girl and woman) #52***

Participants did not like this message overall, because they found the picture to be inappropriate ("She's smiling", "they're too happy"). The text was thought to be too tame by some, but others liked the message about second-hand smoke.

***C1 "Children See, Children Do" and C11 "Children Are 'Just Dying' to be Like You" (girl imitating a woman who is smoking) #21 and #24***

The message in these two versions, about parents not setting a bad example to their children, was generally well received. Participants felt this message was not as powerful or sensational as the other messages that actually depict children suffering from second hand smoke, but the point of it was still seen as one that should be made. Parents felt that this message would help to make smokers with children feel guilty about encouraging a bad habit among their children.

In all groups, participants clearly preferred the headline in C11 "Children Are "Just Dying" to be Like You" over the C1 "Children See, Children Do".

### ***C18 "Like Father, Like Son" (boy imitating man who is smoking) #51***

Participants were not sure what to think about this message, and it generated very little response. Some said it was a true statement and found the sub-text credible, but there was virtually no comment about the picture.

### ***C17 "Be There For Your Children" (young girl sitting on a chair) #50***

This message received a mixed response. Participants tended to like the written message a great deal, particularly the sub-text, but found the picture confusing or ineffective. "Looks like she's bored", "picture stinks", "picture is staged" were some comments. Some participants did not see any connection between the picture and the sub-text, and thought the latter should be teamed up with something else.

### ***C14 "Just Dying to Look 'Cool' " (young men smoking) #27***

This message, clearly targeting teens, was not well-received. The headline was seen to be quite effective, but the picture was regarded as being either ineffective or even counter-productive. Adults clearly liked the idea of having some messaging to target young teens at the age when they are likely to start smoking, but they did not see this kind of approach as being effective. They felt that the youths pictured in the picture were too old, too male and too "cool". If anything, the picture could make rebellious teens even more likely to think that smoking was "cool". According to several participants, it would be better to show unattractive people smoking that no one would want to identify with.

Teens themselves also thought the headline was effective, but were also critical of the picture. Many thought this theme would be more effective as the theme of a poster or TV ad campaign. Many young teens who were "bumming" individual cigarettes were less likely to come into contact with the actual packs in any case. Many were also sceptical as to whether any message would be effective with rebellious teenagers.

### ***C7 "Smoking can make you Impotent" (limping cigarette) #2***

The warning message about impotence was generally well-received and elicited smiles and laughter in almost all sessions. Among adults, most found it very believable – even if it is a longterm impact of smoking that may not manifest itself until middle age. There was a consensus that this was a sensitive issue for men and that it could have an impact on people who are first attracted to smoking because of the masculine and sexual image it can project. The fact that the picture accompanying the message is quite humorous was also praised. Participants felt that with such a deluge of "heavy" and serious messages about

health impacts, it was good to have at least one message that used some levity to make its point.

A number of participants also mentioned that with so many warnings directed specifically at women on the topic of pregnancy and babies, it was good to have a message that focussed on something specifically relevant to men. Many men pointed out that if they had a pack with this message on it, it would be embarrassing for them to let anyone see the pack, particularly if they were out in a place where they might meet women. Some of the young teens and 13 and 14 year olds did not know what impotence was and so were more sceptical about this message. The connotation of the message still seemed to be troubling to men of all ages. Adult smokers were of the opinion that this would be effective with young men.

## **B. Messages About Disease, Death and Cessation**

This section reviews 35 messages including all those with the D designation by Health Canada. The topics include the disease outcomes of smoking, specific diseases, death, poisons, toxins, and cessation.

### **Messages About Disease**

Messages focussing on specific health impacts are usually effective with a broad-based target audience. Lung cancer is the scariest and most high profile disease associated with smoking, and participants in the focus groups were particularly receptive to messages about lung cancer. Heart disease is also known to be a possible consequence of smoking, but it is seen as having many other causes as well and it is not as easy to depict graphically as is lung or oral cancer.

#### ***D1 "Smokers Often Die Hard Deaths"(blackened diseased lungs) #3***

This message included the same picture as D19 but a different text.

Responses to this message varied depending on whether the focus was on the text or on the picture itself. The message about smoking causing lung cancer that will kill someone "slowly and painfully" was a powerful one and some participants commented that these were strong words. Several people mentioned that anyone can joke about death, but the thought of dying slowly and painfully was not so easily dismissed. Many older participants had known someone who had died of cancer and so they knew that this was true. Some of the more staunch smokers tried to deflect this message by pointing out that some people who don't smoke can still get cancer and that some people who smoke may die quickly from a heart attack. Despite these criticisms, most

participants felt that the image of a smoker dying in agony was lurid and effective.

The problem with this message was the picture. While the idea of depicting a diseased lung was popular and seen as effective, the particular photo image used had a number of problems. It was described as an unclear black blob that could be mistaken for anything from raw liver, to two green garbage bags to a Rorschach test ink-blot test. Some participants felt that the image would be stronger if the black diseased lung were contrasted with a healthy lung so that there would be a point of comparison. Also, there were some problems with the French translation here. The expression "à petit feu" is a more upscale expression that was not always understood by participants in the Quebec groups.

### ***D1 "Smokers Often Die Hard Deaths" (lung tumors) #53***

This message, also labelled D1, showed the same picture as D53 but a different text.

The entire message was very effective. Participants were impressed with the text and many found the picture of the lung tumors to be scary. Comments included "gross picture", "picture is agonizing", "picture is beautiful, it makes me look twice", and "hits home". Some other participants, more so among francophones, were confused by the picture and thought it was a throat. Francophones also thought the English version of the main message was more powerful than the French.

### ***D53 "Cigarettes Cause Lung Cancer" (lung tumors) #54***

This message included the same picture as the D1 with the image of lung tumors but a different text.

The consensus was that the sub-text here was even more powerful than that in D1. Overall, the message was extremely strong and effective. "I'm going to quit smoking right now after seeing this" was one comment.

### ***D31 "Smoking Causes Lung Cancer" (man hooked up to respirator) #34***

This message showed the same picture as the following message "Cigarettes Cause Lung Cancer" but a different text (both labelled D31).

Participants commented that the text was quite short and simple and added little to what most already knew about this disease. The picture of the man lying in intensive care had a mixed reception. Those who could see that it was a youngish man with a respirator, clearly dying of lung cancer, found the image effective and sobering. The problem was that the man in the picture was somewhat inconspicuous. Many did not even see that there was a man there until it was pointed out to them in the group discussion.

### ***D31 "Cigarettes Cause Lung Cancer" (man hooked up to respirator) #55***

This message depicted the same picture as above with the message "Smoking Causes Lung Cancer" but a different text.

The message had a number of admirers, particularly among francophones, but others were not especially moved. Comments included "picture doesn't do much", "looks like a guy having a root canal", "this is bland", and "holy shit –

that could be me.” Some felt the text could be made more powerful with more statistics.

***D32 “Breathe Easier. Quit Now” (crumpled package of cigarettes) #35***

This message includes the crumpled cigarette pack image also used with other texts. The image of the crumpled cigarette pack and the broken cigarette was seen to be unclear. Also, the headline about quitting did not totally fit with the message about lung cancer mortality rates.

The text here was seen to be very good in that it gave many people information they did not previously know about the very high mortality rate from smoking. Most participants did not know that such a high proportion of people with lung cancer died within one year and they were disturbed to learn this. It suggested that all the news about breakthroughs in cancer treatment did not seem to extend to cancer caused by smoking.

***D19 “Emphysema. It’s a Living, Breathing Hell” (blackened diseased lungs) #15***

This message included the same picture as the D1 with the image of blackened diseased lungs but a different text.

It was seen to be a good warning message, alongside the other disease related warning messages. Older people are often well-versed in the consequences of emphysema and felt that this was a good thing to stress. Younger people have heard of emphysema but often do not know exactly what it is, and were interested in knowing its effects.

The picture received the same criticism observed in some other warning messages with pictures of lungs. The lung was described as looking like a lump of coal or a raw piece of liver or two gorillas.

***D18 “Smoking Leaves You Breathless” (man with oxygen mask in hand) #14***

This was a very successful warning message. All smokers relate to the shortness of breath and energy loss from smoking. There was high credibility here as this was an immediate consequence of smoking that all smokers had experienced. Even young teens, who tend to regard consequences such as cancer and heart disease as being in the distant future, related to this. Most smokers can identify with being suddenly out of breath doing something that was easy before they started smoking. Many teens felt that this made an important link between smoking and poor athletic performance.

The only criticism of this message was the picture. It was not clear what the man is holding in his hand. Also, some wondered why a middle-aged man was being shown when this was a message that seemed more directed to younger people who like to see themselves as vigorous and who now would not be able to run up a flight of stairs without "huffing and puffing". However, others liked the man and thought he was a "regular-looking guy".



***D54 "Smoking Takes Your Breath Away" (man using an oxygen mask) #58***

This message had the same picture as D35 below but a different text.

The message received somewhat critical reviews. Some francophones and a very few anglophones liked the picture and found it powerful, but the majority of participants thought the overall message was too weak or "tame". A number said the idea had been around too long or they had seen this before. A few questioned the "link" word, finding it to be unclear, false (people who don't smoke also have asthma), or too weak. The oxygen tank was thought to be a fire extinguisher. A few thought the message was "too medical", and had no real human aspect to it.

***D21 "Smoking is a Heartbreaker" and D22 "Heartbreaker" (diseased heart) #29 and #30***

These two versions of the same message were seen to be quite effective. Participants were aware that heart disease is a consequence of smoking and felt that at least one warning message should deal with this disease.

The picture of the diseased heart received mixed reviews. Some could see the damage to the heart in the picture. Most, however, commented that they did not know what a human heart would normally look like, so they could not tell what was wrong with the heart in this picture. Some thought the picture looked like an "alien", a ripe strawberry, or a piece of meat. Many thought this picture would be more effective with pictures comparing a diseased and a healthy heart, or with a picture of a much more severely damaged heart.

Version D21 with the headline "Smoking is a Heartbreaker" was preferred over version D22 with "Heartbreaker" alone as it was seen to make a clearer point. In Montreal, several people found the term "coeur brisé" to be sad and poignant.

***D2 "Smoking Causes Strokes" (a brain) #4***

The reaction to this message was mixed. The text of the message about strokes was seen as good and believable information. Older participants know what a stroke is and are aware of the role of smoking. Younger smokers are less informed about what a stroke is and are also less likely to know that this is a common smoking-related cause of death. However, the description of what happens in a stroke was seen to be rather technical and missed an opportunity to inform how strokes can result in paralysis and debilitation.

In French this lack of awareness faced the added hurdle of there being no short simple translation of the word stroke.

### ***D3 "Cigarettes Cause Mouth Cancer" (diseased mouth) #5***

This warning message with a headline about mouth cancer, text about gum and tooth decay, and a picture of a diseased mouth, was among the most sensational and memorable of all the warning messages tested in the research. In almost every session where it was tested it was the one visual image that participants kept referring to spontaneously. Over and over again, participants recoiled at the sight of this mouth. Many smokers said that just seeing this made them want to quit smoking right away and a number of them also said that they would never let anyone see their cigarette package if it had this picture on it.

Teens in particular were affected by this picture. It was often stated that at this age, people are more concerned about their appearance than they are about their health. This picture was referred to as "nasty" and "disgusting". A few teens questioned whether smoking actually results in a mouth like this, but the vast majority of participants found the picture to be credible.

Many smokers stated that if this was on cigarette packages they would go out of their way to avoid getting a pack with that picture and would request packs with other pictures. Some participants went so far as to say that after seeing this picture it would be forever seared in their minds every time they saw a cigarette.

### ***D13 "Tobacco Causes Suffering" (a mouth with a carcinoma) #57***

This message was very well received by most participants. Although some francophones thought it was an exaggeration, most found both the picture and text to be effective. Comments included "it's very good on the gross meter", "you wanna kiss this guy?", "the picture perfectly matches the text" and "it's the best one (of all)."

### ***D12 "Tobacco Use Disfigures and Kills" (a man with lip cancer) #9***

This message had the identical picture as another D12 (see below) and D13 but a different text.

This was a moderately well-received warning message. Again and again, it was observed that many smokers, especially teens, were affected by visual images depicting physical degradation as a result of smoking. The notion that smoking "disfigures" was seen to be particularly effective, although some in Quebec felt that this term may be going a bit too far.

The problem with this message was the lack of clarity in the picture. Although participants were unanimous in taking the view that the picture was unpleasant to look at, the nature of the growth on the man's lip was not particularly clear.

Many thought it looked like a cold sore or herpes. Several also thought that the guy had simply put a cigarette in his mouth backwards and burned his mouth. It was not clear to anyone that this was necessarily a cancerous growth. Also, very few participants had ever known or heard of anyone being "grossly disfigured" from smoking so they wondered about the credibility of the message.

The consensus was that it was good to have a message about disfigurement but that there needed to be a clearer explanation of what this picture was showing and also preferably a picture showing a greater degree of disfigurement. Many participants felt that teens and women would be most affected by this genre of message and that if it were to appear on cigarette packages, they would try to cover it up or avoid packs with that picture.

### ***D13 "Tobacco Causes Suffering" (a man with lip cancer) #17***

This message had the same picture as D12 with the message "Tobacco Use Disfigures and Kills" and another D12 with the message "Tobacco Use Destroys Your Looks" but a different text.

As noted above, the picture was seen to be too mild and too easily mistaken for a little cold sore.

The reference to "suffering" was effective and even led to some spontaneous mention of the TV ad showing a woman smoking through a hole in her throat. The small text here that makes specific reference to lip, mouth and throat cancer was seen as having a better link to the picture. Some mentioned that lip cancer is something they associate more with chewing tobacco than they do with smoking, but generally the mention of lip cancer, in particular, seemed to grab the attention of many.

### ***D12 "Tobacco Use Destroys Your Looks" (a man with lip cancer) #56***

This message included the same picture as the other D12 and D13 but a different text.

This message was generally well-received. Many felt the text was very believable and the picture was good, although some again questioned the picture ("what is it?"). Comments included "this one is disgusting, it's really gross, worse than the lung thing", "no one wants to look like that" and "it's shock therapy – (they) should put it on (the packages)."

## **Messages About Poisons and Toxins**

Overall, the warning messages about poisons and toxins in tobacco were quite effective. Young people in particular are often concerned about additives in foods and about environmental degradation, so the thought of ingesting horrible-sounding chemicals was particularly unappealing. There was a belief among many that most toxins in cigarettes are added by the manufacturers, rather than occurring naturally in the tobacco leaf itself.

### ***D7 "Cigarette Smoke is Poisonous" (containers of specific poisons) #8***

This warning message depicting bottles of poisons received a wide range of reactions. Some people liked it because they had heard a lot about the cancer-causing agents in tobacco and made a connection with this. Some also looked at the more extensive listing of toxic constituents on the side panel of the pack and made a connection between that and the image of the bottles of poison. The fact that skulls and crossbones were visible on some of the bottles was noted by some participants. Other said this was too small to see.

Other participants thought that this message did not make a powerful point. It showed a bunch of bottles but nothing about the actual impact of these carcinogens. Some felt that the bottles looked "fake" or looked like bottles in a medicine cabinet. A number of people felt that the text about poisons in tobacco was good, but the picture added little to the message. There was considerable confusion as to whether these cancer-causing agents are additives, or whether they occur naturally in the tobacco itself.

Interestingly, many older teens related to this message since a number of them had heard about chemicals in tobacco before and some are hearing a lot about chemicals in food in general. This message also dovetailed nicely with the "poisons" television ad that focused on the toxic chemicals in cigarettes.

### ***D38 "Cigarette Smoke Contains Poisons" (oil drums) #36***

This warning label was not especially well-received in Toronto and Halifax. The picture of oil drums was not eye-catching and the message was seen to be a bit simplistic. Some thought that the text would be stronger if it simply highlighted the presence of 50 substances known to cause cancer without mention that this is out of a total of 4,000 substances. The way it is currently phrased makes it sound like out of 4,000 substances, "only" 50 are cancer-causing and the other 3,950 are not.

However, the word "poison" was felt to be a strong, cautionary word and brought to mind a skull and crossbones.

### ***D35 "Smoking Produces Carbon Monoxide" (man using an oxygen tank) #62***

The message included the same picture as D54, but a different text.

The message drew some favourable comment but many questioned its credibility. If carbon monoxide is so bad, why is it allowed in cigarettes? Why don't people die after smoking if they have just inhaled CO?

***D36 "Cigarette Smoke Contains Formaldehyde" (bottle of formaldehyde)  
#63***

This formaldehyde message and picture were rated more highly than the carbon monoxide message. While francophone participants did not like it, others were quite impressed with both the picture and text, finding it terrific, shocking, and disgusting. Some were reminded that corpses are treated with formaldehyde. Some recalled the "poisons" ad sponsored by Health Canada and connected it to this message.

**Other Messages About Deaths from Cigarettes**

The messages in this group are so different from each other that it is not possible to make generalized comments.

### ***D5 "Smoking Kills" (a cemetery and mourning people at gravesite) #7***

This message had the same picture as D48 below but a different text.

The warning message showing a mourning family at a gravesite was relatively well-received, particularly by adult participants. The words "Smoking Kills" were felt to be compelling and the sight of a gravesite made the subtle point that when you die from smoking you are not only hurting yourself but also hurting loved ones.

Teenagers generally found it harder to relate to this image since they have not had experience with funerals and none have dependants.

For older people, this image was seen to be "sad" and "sobering". Many of these people had been to funerals in their lives, in some cases even as a result of smoking related deaths, so this hit home for them. This was also seen as a good message in terms of how it shows the broader impact of deaths from smoking. Some felt that a potential impact of this message would be that a smoker's children would wave the package in their face and make them feel guilty.

A minority of participants made various cynical comments such as "how do we know that the person under the grave actually died from smoking?" There was also some concern expressed by a handful of participants that this image could hurt the feelings of someone who had just come from a funeral and then took out a package of cigarettes.

### ***D48 "When You Smoke, You Risk Your Life" (cemetery and mourning people at gravesite) #60***

This message had the same picture as D5 but a different text.

The picture of the scene at a cemetery had a significant impact on a number of participants. Several commented that the picture had an increasing effect on them as they continued to look at it – "the more you see it, the more it hits home." Others were not moved by either the picture or the text.

### ***D29 "Smoking is a Killer" (lit cigarette in an ashtray) #33***

This warning message elicited a variety of comments. Many participants were surprised to learn that tobacco kills so many people and that it kills so many more people than all the other causes of death listed. Some participants were affected by this information.



However, a number of participants, particularly in Montreal and among some of the “staunch smokers”, were sceptical of the information and questioned how the data were collected and how exactly any specific death could be attributed to smoking. There was considerable denial with regard to this message. Some participants looked for ways to discredit it, and some wanted to see a source for the information so they could find out more.

The focus groups suggested, however, that the message could be a good point of conversation and could stimulate discussion among smokers and non-smokers about whether such facts were true.

The picture of a single cigarette in a glass ashtray was roundly criticized. Smokers said repeatedly that to them, the sight of that cigarette in an ashtray makes them want to smoke. For a smoker, a lit cigarette in an ashtray looks good.

***D20 “Every 35 Minutes in Canada A Woman Dies from Smoking” (feet with toe tag) #28***

This warning message was effective in terms of the impact of the picture and of the text about “smoking killing you and those you love”.

The headline referring specifically to “a woman” dying from smoking every 35 minutes captured considerable attention. In every focus group participants wanted to know why women were being singled out and how often a man would die from smoking. Some women felt that women were already the target of so many messages dealing with pregnancy and small children and wondered why they were also singled out here. But, at the same time, the mention of “a woman” appeared to make some people think about the message in a different way.

The image of the feet with a toe tag was effective and powerful and the image of a lifeless body with a tag was vivid.

***D28 “This Year, Smoking Will Kill Off The Population Of A Small City” (road sign - small city population 45,000 deceased) #61***

A significant number, although not a majority, of participants thought this was a very good message. For these people, the statistic of 45,000 and the “small city” idea was shocking, surprising, or scary, and extremely effective. Others were not affected by this message at all, and could not relate to the statistic or image of a small city. One Toronto participant said, “well, I’m not living in that city.” Other comments included “it’s still just a statistic”, “it’s overwhelming, absolutely stunning”, and “show me a (picture of a) ghost town instead.”

***D4 "This Year, the Equivalent of a Small City Will Die From Smoking"  
(causes of death chart) #6***

Overall, this warning message was regarded by most participants as fairly weak, although there was a small, but not insignificant, segment of people for whom this message did resonate.

Many participants tended to ignore statistics and charts. In this case, participants were also rating this warning message in the context of other warning messages showing colour pictures that were much more sensational.

The text was also quite different from the other messages in that it refers to the impact of tobacco on Canada as a whole and not on individuals. A number of participants were sceptical as to the source of the data about tobacco deaths and what was counted. The bar showing the number of deaths from tobacco was also so long that it was sometimes mistaken for a thick line underlining the information above.

At the same time, some participants, many of whom had a more intellectual inclination, were impressed with this message. They felt it did a good job of putting into perspective the fact that tobacco is a “silent killer” of so many people in comparison with some other causes of death that get far more publicity but kill far fewer people. Some also thought that this message on cigarette packages could prove to be a source of conversation and discussion.

In Quebec, there was a particular problem with participants not quite grasping the idea of “the equivalent of a small city dying every year from smoking”. This analogy was not clear and sowed confusion among participants, possibly because the French text is long and complex.

### ***D16 “Light But Deadly” (no image - text only) #11***

This message in some ways was seen as having a different purpose than the others, that of “debunking” the myth of light cigarettes being less harmful. Only a few smokers admitted that they smoked light cigarettes for this reason, but they were sure that others this. This was not seen as a message that would play a role in making people quit altogether, but it was seen as showing “weekend smokers” that they should not have false feeling of security just because they smoke a light brand of cigarette. It was felt that this message would only be effective if it were placed on packages of light cigarettes.

The fact that this was the only message in this sequence that did not include a graphic or picture made it less effective.

Most smokers agreed with the message and felt that light cigarettes are indeed just as bad as regular cigarettes, but some were confused and wondered how it was possible for a cigarette that is lower in tar and nicotine to be just as bad for human health. Teens were especially surprised by this information and felt that this was good new information to have.

## Messages About Cessation

These messages elicited fairly positive responses. Most participants welcomed the “positive” messages about the benefits of quitting smoking. However, most felt that the graphic images used were not very effective.

***D25 “Quit for the Health of it” 24 hours – heart attack risk is cut) #32***

***D40 “Quit for the Health of It” (1 year - heart disease risk cut in half)  
#37***

***D41 “Quit for the Health of It” (5 years - lung cancer risk cut in half)  
#38***

***D42 “Quit for the Health of It” (10-15 years, risk like a non-smoker)  
#39***

***(all four depict a crumpled package of cigarettes)***

This sequence of messages, all with the same graphic image showing the benefits of quitting smoking over various time periods, was seen as almost exclusively directed at adults who are currently smoking. These messages were not felt to be a deterrent to a younger person thinking of starting to smoke since they do not refer to the consequences of smoking. In all groups, the main point about this series of messages was that it was good to say something positive about the benefits of quitting smoking. Several adults expressed the view that some smokers may feel they have already done so much damage to themselves by smoking that there is no point in quitting, but these messages show that it is never too late to quit and to reap some benefits.

The potential problem with these labels is that younger smokers may conclude that they can quit a few years down the road and that eventually all the damage they have done to themselves will fade. Teenage smokers could thus take solace from or be encouraged to smoke from this message.

Most liked the idea of using the series of four messages that combine to tell a story. When asked to choose, most participants seemed to think that the messages stressing benefits after short time frames (i.e.: 24 hours, 1 year) were more motivating than those 10 to 15 years in the future. Others felt it was a mistake to stress benefits that occur just 24 hours after stopping since this was not felt to be believable and could possibly lead people to think they could smoke every second day. Many felt that rather than the text saying “After 1 year as a non-smoker...”, it should read “1 year after quitting smoking...”and thereby put more a stress on the word “quitting”.

The headline “Quit for the Health of it” was well-received and was seen by most to be a good play on words.

The visual image was confusing to some. Many were not clear what it was showing and thought at first the crumpled pack of cigarettes was a little plastic bag. The image did not enhance the message.

### ***D17 "Quit and Live" (broken cigarette) #12***

Like other cessation messages, participants appreciated the positive and motivational aspect of the message.

Most participants, however, felt that the picture of a broken cigarette added little to the message and should either be dispensed with or replaced with something more evocative. Also, the title "Quit and Live" was regarded as being a bit trite by some participants. Nonetheless, this was clearly a successful message in that it offered a positive message amid the "doom and gloom" of some other health warnings.

### ***D49 "Quit Smoking And Live Longer" (two hands breaking a cigarette) #59***

Participants were moderately positive about this message, but most also felt it did not go far enough. The consensus was that it was a "nice" or "good" message. A number of francophone participants were intrigued by the message but felt it did not go far enough and they wanted to know more. The text seemed to have more impact than the picture.

### ***D24 "I Love Not Smoking" (I (heart symbol) Not Smoking) #31***

Participants generally found this headline and graphic to be "silly" or "cheesy". Most felt that the heart standing for love was out of date and reminiscent of the "I Love New York" campaigns of the 1980s. Also, many could not see the point of smoking a pack of cigarettes with "I Love Not Smoking" on it. The information itself about the benefits of quitting for one's heart was seen to be acceptable, but marred by a graphic and title that added little to the impact of the text and might even detract from it. Some staunch smokers liked the more positive message in this picture and text.

## **C. Messages About the Environmental Effects of Tobacco**

A total of eight messages were designated by Health Canada as ETS. Most of these dealt with the environmental effects of tobacco.

For the most part, smokers were not particularly motivated by messages about the impact of second hand smoke; most say they are more motivated by how smoking is affecting their own health, not that of others (with the exception of the impact of second hand smoke on children, dealt with separately). Smokers in all sessions tended to take the view that the main purpose of these messages was to provide "ammunition" to non-smokers as a way of indirectly pressuring smokers socially. Some thought the whole issue of second-hand smoke was

exaggerated. However, teen participants tended to have a more favourable reaction to this series of messages.

***ETS1 “Smoking Sickens Children” (young boy with asthma using aspirator) #18***

This warning message showing a young boy with asthma was one of the more effective messages. It served many purposes. In dealing with the impact of smoking on children, it resonated particularly well with women. At the same time, the child is somewhat older and is a boy and was a message that fathers, thinking about themselves when they were young, seemed to identify with.

There is broad awareness of the increasing prevalence of asthma and how it can be aggravated by second-hand smoke. Many smokers knew of or had children with asthma and tried to avoid smoking near them. Several participants suffered from asthma themselves and therefore also identified with this message.

The one problem with the message is the fact that it is not clear that second hand smoke from the parents is causing the child’s asthma. Some participants thought that the young boy in the picture may have exacerbated his asthma by smoking himself.

***ETS4 “Even Second Hand Smoke Kills” (a woman smoking directly into the face of a man) #41***

There was considerable scepticism about this message. The picture showing a smoker blowing smoke directly into the face of a non-smoker was seen to be very unrealistic. Smokers pointed out that most smokers are much more considerate of non-smokers and that almost nobody blows smoke in someone’s face.

The fact that “hundreds” of non-smokers die every year from lung cancer caused by second-hand smoke was seen by some to be quite a small number and at the same time was felt to be an exaggeration. Some participants said these messages might reinforce their keeping away from non-smokers when they smoke, but would not have an impact on making them want to quit.

Teens sometimes liked to think of themselves as being more considerate and were more motivated to stop smoking after seeing this message.

One issue with messages about second hand smoke is that they imply to some people that one may as well smoke since you get second-hand smoke even if you don’t smoke.

***ETS6 “Where there’s Smoke There’s Hydrogen Cyanide” (billowing smoke) #43***



This message had the same picture as ETS8 and ETS9 but a different text.

This warning was fairly effective. The picture of smoke was seen as reminiscent of a smouldering fire that could lead to a conflagration. Although most did not know what hydrogen cyanide was, the text referring to insecticide and fumigation was enough of an explanation.

One problem was that it is not explicitly stated that tobacco contains this compound. A message featuring such a long chemical name also intimidated some participants – the message was complex for some. However, others made a link between cigarettes and foodstuffs that have labels filled with “scary sounding” chemical substances.

***ETS8 “Where There’s Smoke There’s Poison” (billowing smoke) #45***

This message had the same picture as ETS6 and ETS9 but a different text.

This was seen to be one of the most effective labels dealing with poisons. The word “poison” itself attracted considerable attention. Also, the description of cigarette smoke containing substances found in ant poison, moth balls and toilet bowl cleansers was shocking and effective. A number of participants said that just reading this made them want to quit smoking. This was new information to most participants and was credible.

***ETS9 “Smoking Hurts Everyone” (billowing smoke) #46***

The message had the same picture as ETS6 and ETS8 but a different text.

Many participants liked the picture showing billowing smoke. Also, the headline with “smoking hurts everyone” was more acceptable than other texts about second hand smoke and was a comment that few could disagree with.

***ETS7 “You’re Not the Only One Smoking This Cigarette” (an upright partially-smoked cigarette) #44***

This message sent out mixed signals. The picture and headline were rated quite highly, but the idea that two-thirds of smoke from a cigarette becomes second-hand smoke made some smokers feel better: they liked the idea that they were only getting one-third of the smoke. Once again, many smokers mentioned freely that they don’t really care about non-smokers, only about themselves.

On a positive note, they felt it was good to mention 50 cancer causing agents on their own, without making any reference to this being out of a total of 4,000 chemicals. Some participants, particularly teens and women, wanted to feel that they were being considerate of others and said that this message did indeed make them feel guilty about smoking near other people.

***ETS5 “Idle But Deadly” (lit cigarette in an ashtray) #42***

This message had the same picture as D29 but a different text.

There was little reaction to this message. The text is short and does not provide new information. The picture, also used in other labels, was once again seen by many participants as showing what to a smoker is a positive image of a cigarette in an ashtray that makes them crave a cigarette even more. Only in Montreal did some smokers find this image to be effective in tandem with the "Idle but Deadly" headline. The message makes somewhat of a point about second hand smoke from a lit cigarette, but it was felt that this point was made more compellingly in other messages. This message could have the effect of providing "ammunition" to non-smokers who are being exposed to smoke from a lit cigarette.

***ETS3 "Smoking Kills" (cemetery and little girl grieving near headstone) #40***

This message showing a headstone with a little girl grieving was very successful. Many participants said, top-of-mind, that the image stuck in their minds and was associated with sadness and tragedy. In Halifax in particular, people said that this made them think about losing loved ones to lung cancer, or the possibility that they could end up leaving behind spouses and children.

However, a number of participants could not tell that there was a crying girl on her knees in the corner of the picture. Also, some felt that the text should make some reference to how smoking can kill those you love and thereby create more of a connection to the image of a grieving relative in a cemetery.

**D. Messages About Addiction**

A total of three messages, designated A by Health Canada, dealt with the addictive nature of smoking.

For the most part, participants liked the idea of warning messages about the addictiveness of cigarettes. Adults were especially keen on this, since many had tried unsuccessfully to quit and believed themselves to be addicted.

***A1 "Don't Become Addicted" (woman with hole in throat smoking a cigarette) #19***

This message was among those most often mentioned as one that stuck in people's minds. In both Toronto and Halifax, most participants had seen the television ad showing the same woman smoking through a hole in her throat and they immediately recognized the image, thus reinforcing the ad.

However, only a few participants picked up the idea that smoking is so addictive that someone would not be able to quit, even after losing their larynx to

smoking. Apart from the power of the picture, simply saying “Don’t Become Addicted” was seen to be a bit trite. In Halifax, several teens were bilingual and volunteered that the French headline that translates to “Don’t be a slave to tobacco” was more effective than the English.

In Montreal, where the “Debi” ad did not run in French, this message was less well-received. Several participants found the image a bit unrealistic.

### **A3 "Don't Get Addicted" (no image - text only) #20**

This message was also seen to make an important point about addiction; however, it suffers from having no picture or graphic image. Most participants thought the text provided good detail about how addictive cigarettes can be, but participants were divided as to the wisdom of making a comparison between tobacco and cocaine or heroin. Some thought it was a graphic description and warning of just how addictive smoking tobacco can really be. Others pointed out that they had never used cocaine or heroin and therefore did not know what the comparison referred to. Some also worried that this comparison might lead some young people to try cocaine or heroin since they would be equated with tobacco.

### **A7 "Stop Before you Start" (a man smoking offering a cigarette to another man) #48**

Participants were underwhelmed by this message. Comments ranged from "it's all right" to "boring", "really stupid" and "not realistic". Although some francophone participants thought the English message "Stop Before You Start" was stronger than the French version, anglophones themselves were not too impressed with it. The picture was somewhat confusing (is it a father and son?).

## **E. Other Messages**

A total of five other messages were tested.

**07 "Be A Sport. Quit." (a basketball player) #64a**

**08 "Be A Sport. Quit." (a hockey player) #64b**

**09 "Be A Sport. Quit." (a woman athlete) #64c**

**010 "Be A Sport. Quit." (a roller blader) #64d**

The message "Be a Sport. Quit." was generally liked or at least thought to be "OK" by the vast majority of participants, and was thought to be good for younger people. Francophones thought the English title worked much better than the French and had more "punch". Some older participants would have preferred a picture that they could identify with more, such as a person out of breath climbing a stairway.

The hockey picture was the clear first choice among the four photos. Some liked the roller blader because this was not a team sport and was an activity that many people could identify with.

### **03 "Don't Let Smoking Drag You Down" (man smoking) #47**

This label makes a point about smoking leading to shortness of breath and energy loss that many smokers identified with. Many participants pointed out that even if you have just started smoking, you can still find yourself out of breath frequently. Also, this is not a health effect that will hit far in the future; it is an effect that even teenagers notice quickly.

There was division of opinion, however, about the picture. Some felt that the picture of an older man detracted from the message. Many older people get tired and short of breath for a variety of reasons not related to smoking, and it would be better to depict a young person who is unable to keep up running. According to some participants, this theme was an opportunity to reinforce to young people that if they want to be active, smoking will be detrimental. Some older smokers identified with the older man in the picture, who reminded them of how smoking has affected them, but others felt a picture of a younger person would be a better deterrent.

#### **4.0 FLIP AND SLIDE MESSAGES - THE CONCEPT AND CONTENT**

Phase III of the focus group research also tested responses to the concept of including messages on the flip and slide portions of cigarette packages, as well as the content of 11 health and cessation messages that might be used.

A number of cigarette packages with different messages pasted on the front of the flip and back of the slide, were handed around for participants to look at and open. They were then asked their opinion about the idea of having additional health and/or cessation messages on the flip and slide.

There was widespread acceptance and approval of the idea of messages on the flip and slide. The vast majority of participants were enthusiastic, saying it was "a very good idea", "neat", "effective" and would "generate conversation".

In one session, when the moderator asked if perhaps health messages on the front along with flip and slide messages would be "too much" coverage of the cigarette packages, participants enthusiastically responded "no".

Although time limitations in the focus groups precluded a detailed response to flip/slide content, participants were asked to read through 11 potential messages and comment on things that caught their attention. Eight of these were cessation messages and three provided health information about lung disease, heart attack, and brain damage.

Participants responded very favourably to the cessation messages. This positive response was especially strong in the francophone sessions, but cessation messages were also the preference among anglophones. Some francophones, however, felt the cessation messages were a bit too optimistic and underestimated the cravings and hardship of quitting ("What if I don't have friends to help me?"). Participants liked the website number, the "you will succeed" idea inherent in the cessation messages, the mention of physical activity, and other aspects of the content.

Although cessation messages were preferred as potential content for the flip and slide, responses to the three health information messages were generally positive, and most participants who commented on them thought they were very informative.