

Response of mass media, tobacco industry and smokers to the introduction of graphic cigarette pack warnings in Australia

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Background: In the year 2006, Australia introduced graphic cigarette packet warnings. Previous warnings were text only. New warnings include one of 14 pictures, many depicting tobacco-related pathology. **Methods:** This study monitored the roll-out of the health policy initiative using multiple methodologies. Print media coverage of new pack warnings was observed over 3 years. Story content was coded as positive (supportive of pack warnings), neutral or negative. An observational study of small random sample of metropolitan stores ($n = 16$) over 7 months measured the pace of the roll-out in shops. Once new packs were readily available in stores, smokers ($n = 152$) were intercepted in city streets and asked about their reactions. **Results:** Of the 67 media stories, 85% were positive or neutral about the new warnings and 15% were negative. Supportive content presented health benefits. Unsupportive content presented industry arguments. After the legislative change, it took 2 months before any new packs appeared in stores. After 6 months, the majority carried them. Newest images had highest recall among smokers. About 60% said new warnings detracted from the look of their brand. About 51% felt the increased risk of dying from smoking-related illness. About 38% felt motivated to quit. **Conclusion:** Plans by government to introduce graphic warnings were delayed up to 2 years, apparently by heavy industry lobbying. Actual widespread appearance in shops occurred several months after the implementation date. While media coverage of the new warnings reported the industry arguments against them, the balance of coverage was overwhelmingly positive. Smokers' initial reactions were in line with tobacco control objectives.

Keywords: health warnings, packaging.

Introduction

Legislative measures which control the distribution, use, promotion and packaging of tobacco products are an essential tool for tobacco control. The World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC)¹ is a global health treaty designed to help curb the global tobacco epidemic and associated burden of disease and mortality. Countries that ratify the WHO FCTC commit themselves to a schedule of tobacco control legislative reform in an effort to advance disease prevention and health promotion.

Evidence-based comprehensive tobacco control programs include demand reduction and supply reduction provisions. Core demand reduction strategies include price (tax) and counter-marketing (anti-tobacco advertising). The regulation of packaging and labelling of tobacco products is one component of a comprehensive approach (see Articles 6–14)¹ to reduce the demand for tobacco products.^{1,2}

The rationale for package warnings is based on the principle that '[e]very person should be informed of the health consequences, addictive nature and mortal threat posed by tobacco consumption'.¹ Package warnings should contribute

to understanding of the health consequences of smoking, thus decreasing motivation to smoke, increasing motivation to quit and decreasing the consumption of tobacco overall.^{3,4} The FCTC outlines countries' legal obligations with regard to the size and content of cigarette packet warnings. Pictorial warnings are recommended and several countries are legislating for the mandatory inclusion of graphic cigarette packet warnings.^{5–7} To date, 15 countries have introduced graphic cigarette packet warnings. Although the European Union provided graphic warnings for use by each of its Member States, only Belgium has adopted them to date.

In 2006, Australia changed from text-based to pictorial warnings on tobacco products. Trade practices legislation⁸ mandated that prescribed health warnings be included on cigarette and other tobacco packaging. For any products manufactured on or after 1 March 2006, the regulations required that graphic images, explanatory messages and the Quitline number covered 30% of the front and 90% of the back of the pack.⁹

The 14 warnings were divided into two sets.^{10–12} From 1 March 2006 to 31 October 2006, only Set A was printed on packs. This set comprised graphic pictures associated with messages such as smoking causes: peripheral vascular disease; emphysema; and mouth and throat cancer. Other messages were: smoking clogs your arteries; do not let children breathe your smoke; smoking—a leading cause of death; and quitting will improve your health.¹¹

This article presents a study of the roll-out of graphic cigarette packet warnings in Australia using three perspectives: media coverage of the policy initiative from inception through roll-out; observations in shops; and smokers' responses. Specifically, the aims of this research were to explore the nature and extent of media reporting of the policy initiative; the rate at which the new packs replaced the old ones in retail outlets; and the very early reactions of smokers when exposed to the graphic messages.

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Methods

Media coverage

Print media coverage was monitored in Australian national daily papers and major metropolitan papers in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide from the first announcement of the Australian Government's intention to legislate for new graphic cigarette packet warnings (September 2003) until 6 months after the legislation took effect (September 2006). General news, editorials and letters to the editor were classified as 'print media stories'. The file of all material used in this analysis is available at http://www.cancersa.org.au/cms_resources/200808%20Graphic%20Warning%20Media%20Coverage.pdf.

Print media stories were coded by one author into five categories: 'actively positive'; 'positive'; 'neutral'; 'negative'; and 'actively negative'. A story was coded as 'actively positive' or 'actively negative' when the article was arguing in favour or against graphic cigarette packet warnings. When articles were fact-based rather than argument-based, they were coded as 'generally positive', 'generally negative' or 'neutral'. Codes were determined on the basis of the volume of text within the article dedicated to the purported merits or limitations of graphic warnings.

Point-of-sale observations

Tobacco point-of-sale observations were undertaken to detect when packets with new warnings first started to make an appearance in shops and when they were widespread. A methodology was designed to provide these markers, rather than to measure with accuracy the percentage prevalence of types of packets in stores. Point-of-sale observations were also designed to inform the timing of the smoker intercept survey. They provided an indication of when packets with new warnings were starting to become prevalent, and in roughly equal proportion to packets with old warnings, but not at saturation. The Adelaide stores observed were in the CBD, the same location as the smoker intercept survey.

Retail outlets for the observations were randomly selected from the Electronic Yellow Pages 2005 edition for Adelaide and Melbourne from all listings located in the central business districts under: 'supermarket' or 'food &/or general stores'; 'tobacconist'; 'Deli' (Adelaide only); 'Milk Bar' (Melbourne Only); and 'service station'. Two from each of the main listings described were randomly selected and visited on the first Tuesday of the month for 7 months, starting on 7 March 2006. An additional observation was made in Adelaide and incorporated a visit prior to the implementation of the legislation.

Research assistants introduced themselves to the retailer, identifying themselves as working for the Cancer Council. They asked for permission to observe the cigarette display stating that they were conducting a study on tobacco displays in retail outlets. The total number of packages visible was counted and the number of new and old warnings was recorded for the eight top selling brands. They also recorded the presence or absence of promotional items for sale such as tins or cigarette pack covers.

Smoker intercept survey

In July 2006, when approximately half of packets in retail outlets were those with new warnings (see 'Results' section), people smoking outside office buildings in Adelaide's central business district were intercepted by research assistants working for the Cancer Council and were asked to participate in a brief survey. People smoking in groups were interviewed asked to step away from the group before interview.

Participants were asked whether they had with them, or had ever bought a packet of cigarettes with the new warnings. They were asked which warning(s) they had seen on packets they had purchased. They were then asked about their own initial reactions to the warnings, first unprompted, then using a scale of affective responses.¹³ They were asked whether '... seeing the images increase[s], decrease[s] or make[s] no difference to [their] perception of dying from a smoking-related illness, should [they] continue to smoke?' Participants were also asked whether they thought the new warnings detracted from the look of their brand (answering 'yes'/'no').

This study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University of Adelaide and The Cancer Council South Australia. Analyses were conducted using SPSS v15.0.1.

Results

Media coverage

Volume of articles

During the observation period, graphic cigarette packet warnings were mentioned in 67 separate stories. Of these, 76% were 'actively positive' ($n=29$) or generally positive ($n=29$) about the new warnings, 9% ($n=6$) were 'neutral' and 15% were 'actively negative' ($n=5$) or 'generally negative' ($n=5$).

As depicted in figure 1, print media coverage was prevalent at the time of the government announcement of its intention to legislate (September 2003) during the lead up to its implementation (February 2004) and around the time of the government's announcement of its final decision about the nature and timing of the introduction of the new warnings (June 2004).

A small number of stories appeared in June 2005, arising from a journalist's Freedom of Information search of government documents into the process of decision making about the timing and nature of the warnings. There was another spike in stories just before the warnings were to be introduced (February 2006), and another in the months following implementation (April–June 2006).

Content of articles

Articles surrounding the initial announcement of the intention to introduce graphic packet warnings contained statements from three sources: government; health agencies; and the tobacco industry. Government content included the initial announcement of intention to legislate in the next calendar year (i.e. 2004), the plan to have graphic warnings covering 50% of the front and 50% of the back of the packets and health reasons for introducing warnings.¹⁴ During the final announcement of the revised size of warnings (30% of front and 90% of back of the packets) and revised timings (early 2006), government content included their decision to amend the size of the warnings to allow for brand communication.¹⁵

Tobacco industry arguments reported at the time of the initial announcement were not supportive of the introduction of the warnings. Key themes were that: the timing of implementation was too rapid; there was no evidence on the effectiveness of warnings; the new warnings would be anti-competitive and impinge on the ability to communicate brands/trademarks to customers; people would use cigarette packet covers; and the introduction of the new graphic warnings would foster a black market.^{16,17}

Articles in the lead up to the government's final announcement, and in a smaller number of articles published a year

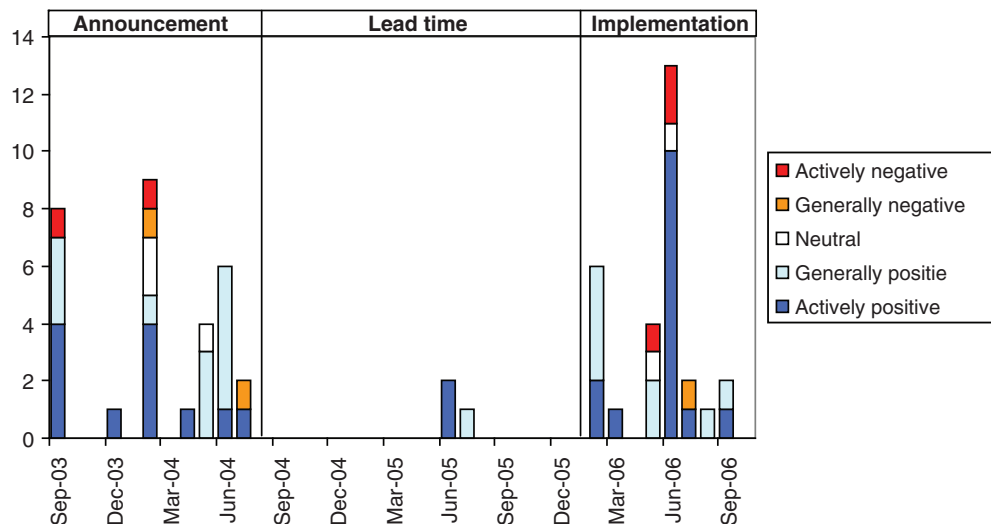


Figure 1 Number of media stories over time, and tone of stories

later, reported that the tobacco industry had lobbied hard against the introduction of graphic cigarette packet warnings and that this had resulted in amendments of the size of the warnings and significant time delays.^{18–21} Additional arguments put forward by industry included that: the Australian Department of Health and Ageing bureaucrats had undertaken rushed and inadequate consultations; industry would have to import new expensive machinery to print the new packages; industry research with smokers demonstrated such warnings would be ineffective; retailers would suffer harm; and the government's small business credentials would be damaged. There was also mention of potential litigation under the Australian Constitution. Once the final announcement by government had occurred, there were neither tobacco company interviews nor positive framing of tobacco industry arguments in stories.

Health agency content was supportive of the proposed warnings, focusing on their benefits for health and their demonstrated effectiveness in promoting quitting. At the time of reported lobbying and changes to government's plans, health agencies argued for larger warnings and for a swift implementation. They also presented a case against the industry's arguments about ineffectiveness and raised questions about political donations, challenging the industry's motives.^{22–24}

Stories in the lead up to the actual implementation of the warnings were all positive, covering the reasons for the warnings. There were also a small number of positive stories a few months after the warnings were introduced, at the time that an accompanying anti-tobacco television campaign was launched.^{25–27}

A group of stories appeared about cigarette packet covers in the first half of 2006. Apart from one, these stories were confined to Adelaide where a sporting personality's wife was reported as selling cigarette packet covers in two teams' livery. The majority of these stories were in favour of the warnings, negative about covers and the association with the teams elicited very negative response by supporters of the sport. However, some letters to the editor at this time were negative about graphic warnings.^{28–33}

In late 2006, the final few stories about graphic warnings generally referred to them as effective health interventions when discussing other topics such as potential health warnings and alcohol.^{34,35}

Point-of-sale observations

Participation

Eight stores were observed in each of Victoria and South Australia. Participation rates peaked at 100% (16 out of 16 stores) at the first visit, dropping to 88% (14 out of 16 stores) by the end of the study.

Pace of roll-out of new warnings at point-of-sale

At the time of legislative implementation (March 2006), there were no packets with new warnings in the stores visited. In April 2006, packets with new warnings were starting to appear and by June 2006, all of the observed stores had at least some cigarette packets with the new warnings. By September 2006, 6 months after the implementation date, ~80% of the eight top selling brands carried the new warnings (see figure 2).

Other changes at point-of-sale

Between visits 1 (March 2006) and 7 (September 2006), two Melbourne stores had moved their cigarettes completely out of sight. In Adelaide, one store turned all cigarette packets upside down and back to front which considerably obscured new warnings. Otherwise, there were no changes to cigarette positioning or displays.

'Special edition' cigarette tins and cigarette packet covers were made available for sale at the time of the introduction of the legislation. These became less prevalent over time (March 2006: 4 out of 16 stores compared with September 2006: 1 out of 14 stores).

Intercept survey

In total, 152 smokers participated in the survey; 61% of participants were female. Thirty-two smokers approached (17%) declined to participate.

Exposure to new warnings

Overall, 58% ($n=88$) of those interviewed were carrying a packet with them at the time with 86% of all participants ($n=131$) able to remember the warning on their current packet. Twenty-two participants (15%) had or reported having a packet with the old text style warnings and

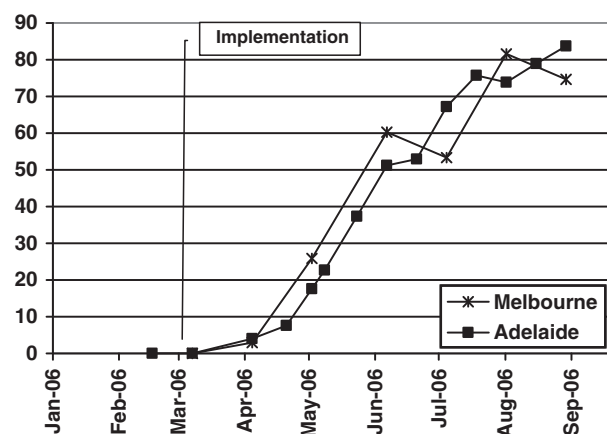


Figure 2 Percentage of cigarette packs with new warning

Table 1 Positive and negative affect elicited by new graphic pack warnings

First reaction to the warnings (prompted), <i>n</i> = 149	% (95% CI)
Moderately to very much	
Inspired (to quit)	29 (22–36)
Determined (to quit)	25 (18–32)
Alert	55 (47–63)
Scared	19 (13–25)
Afraid	17 (11–23)
Nervous	19 (13–25)
Upset	17 (11–23)
Distressed	10 (5–15)
Excited	3 (0–6)
Enthusiastic	4 (1–7)
Changes to perception of chances of dying from smoking related illness, <i>n</i> = 148	
Increased	51 (43–59)
Decreased	1 (0–3)
No difference	49 (41–57)
Do the warnings detract from the look of your brand?, <i>n</i> = 149	
Yes	60 (52–68)
No	40 (32–48)

109 (70%) had a packet with new graphic warnings on them. The remainders were unsure (*n* = 17) or used a cigarette holder or tin or said that they did not know (*n* = 4).

Of all participants, only two (1%) said that they had never bought a packet with a new warning and were not interviewed further. The remainder (*n* = 150) had bought a packet with the new warnings on them at some point. Six (4%) said that their current pack was the first pack they had bought with new warnings, 15 (10%) had bought their first pack within the past fortnight, a further 39% had bought it within the past 3–4 weeks and 44% had bought one a month or more ago.

The pack messages that participants least recalled purchasing were ‘smoking—a leading cause of death’ (47%) and ‘quitting will improve your health’ (41%). The most recalled messages were ‘gangrene/peripheral vascular disease’ (82%) and ‘mouth and throat cancer’ (70%).

Smokers’ reactions to new warnings

Initial responses (i.e. unprompted) to the new warnings were disgust (36%), shock (6%), anger (4%), distress (1%) or feeling motivated to quit (3%). Thirty per cent reported feeling indifferent. As shown in table 1, prompted responses indicated that 55% reported feeling alert in response to the warnings, 38% [95% confidence interval (CI): 30–48] felt motivated

to quit, and a lesser proportion of 23% (95% CI: 16–30) were upset or distressed by them. Half (51%) reported that seeing new warnings increased their own risk perception of dying of a smoking-related illness.

During the course of the survey, a total of 18 respondents indicated that they tried to avoid the warnings, with six respondents reporting buying tins and three reporting transferring cigarettes to packets with old (non-graphic) warnings.

Over half of the respondents (60%) reported that the new cigarette warnings had a negative impact on the look of their brand. When offered the opportunity to comment at the end of the interview, 47 (30%) commented in support of the new warnings. Many offered comments indicating that they thought such warnings were an important motivator for quitting and a deterrent to non-smokers, including young people. Overall, 24 (16%) offered negative comments, mostly relating to their perception that the warnings were unlikely to work.

Discussion

As Australia was among the first countries to legislate for graphic cigarette warnings, with only a handful of countries preceding it, the results of this research indicated that the introduction of graphic cigarette warnings was slower in Australia than elsewhere. In Canada, there was a 6-month lead time from legislation to implementation and in Brazil there was a 12-month lead time. In Australia, there was a 9-month delay between the government publicly announcing its intention to legislate and its final decision about legislation content, with legislation not taking effect until a further 20 months. As reported in this article, analysis of press coverage shows that the delays coincided, and were consistent with, the lobbying by the tobacco industry.

Australian legislation mandated a starting date for the production of packets with new warnings rather than a starting date for sale in retail outlet. Thus, new packets did not appear in shops until a month after implementation and they were not prevalent until 3 months later. Six months after implementation, new warnings were increasing in prevalence but had not yet reached saturation. Countries planning to introduce similar legislation may prefer to follow New Zealand’s practice and legislate a sale date rather than a production date, thereby avoiding delays in implementation.

Promotion of cigarette tins and covers are often cited as a likely ‘side-effect’ of introducing warnings, undermining their impact. There was little evidence of retailers attempting to avoid displaying warnings by turning packets or taking other measures. The smoker intercept study also showed that while there was some use of tins and covers, they were far from generalized.

The policy intent for the new pack warning regime was to reduce tobacco use. The media coverage was supportive of graphic cigarette packet warnings, ultimately citing them as an effective intervention on which others could be modelled, e.g. alcohol. The negative news coverage was consistent in its themes, with a central theme covering the industry arguments that warnings would not be effective. Other neutral media coverage resulting from a Freedom of Information request also reported that industry lobbying of politicians was heavy and effective in delaying the introduction of the pack warnings.

Initial affective responses reported by smokers were encouraging indicating that the new packet warnings had increased their perceptions of dying from a smoking-related illness, and/or they reported feeling motivated to quit in response to them. The packets with messages about mouth cancer (82%) and gangrene (70%) were the most recalled.

These results are limited in their generalizability and larger scale studies are required to validate the impact of the warnings at a population level, and to assess any impact on quitting behaviour.

Despite these limitations, the tobacco industry's public objection included the assertion that the policy would be ineffective in reducing tobacco use. It also raised brand identity and operational issues, either because it truly was the industry's main concern or because it needed a publicly acceptable rationale for objecting. A striking feature of our results is the almost warm acceptance by many smokers of the new labelling regime. Given the 'friendship' it has been claimed smokers have for their very own brand of cigarettes^{36–38} and the untiring efforts of tobacco companies to build this friendship and loyalty,^{39,40} we might expect more resentment from smokers for having their familiar pack defaced by unwelcoming graphic images. It is encouraging that there was little evidence of such negativity, suggesting that even among current smokers there is at least a latent readiness to be confronted by the hard facts about the consequences of smoking.

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Conflicts of interest: None declared.

Key points

- Tobacco industry lobbying tactics appear to have been effective in delaying the introduction of graphic cigarette packet warnings in Australia. The same tactics are likely to be used in other countries.
- Australian legislation proscribed a date of production for new packs, rather than a date of sale, which created further opportunities for delays. Policy makers in other countries could proscribe a date for sale rather than a date for manufacture to avoid this.
- Many smokers demonstrated an almost warm acceptance of the new labelling regime, and preliminary evidence of increased intentions to quit.

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