Cancer Research UK Briefing: Standardised packaging of tobacco products

Evidence consistently demonstrates that standardised packaging reduces the appeal of tobacco products and increases the prominence of on-pack health warnings

Cancer Research UK campaigned for the introduction of plain, standardised packaging of tobacco products to protect children from a deadly addiction and save lives

Standardised packaging of tobacco products will be implemented across the UK on May 20 2016. It is anticipated that tobacco companies will launch legal action in an attempt to block, delay or amend the legislation[1]

Background

- Two-thirds of smokers start before they are 18[2] - the beginning of an addiction that will kill up to 2 in 3 long-term smokers from a smoking related cause[3,4].
- Tobacco use is the UK's single greatest cause of preventable illness and avoidable death, with 100,000 people dying each year from smoking-related diseases, including cancer.[5]
- The Government launched the first public consultation on standardised packaging in April 2012[6]. In March 2015, MPs voted to introduce the measure, with implementation set for 20 May 2016, alongside the implementation of the EU Tobacco Products Directive[7].
- A YouGov poll for Cancer Research UK (CRUK) found that 72% of UK adults support standardised packaging, with only 15% opposed (YouGov, January 2015).[8]

The evidence for standardised packaging

In 2011 the Department of Health commissioned a systematic review[9] of 37 studies on the impact of standardised packaging (this was updated with a further 17 studies in 2013 to form 'the Stirling Review'[10]). The evidence consistently demonstrated that standard packs would reduce the appeal of tobacco products. In the systematic review's qualitative studies, which examined appeal, some key themes emerged to explain why standard packs were consistently rated as less attractive, of lower quality and had a poorer image than branded packs. Specifically, the review found that standard packs, in comparison to branded equivalents:

- Weaken attachment to brands and project a less desirable identity for the smoker.
- Expose the reality of smoking and have colours with negative connotations.

All the quantitative studies within the systematic review which examined the attractiveness of standard packs found they were less attractive than branded equivalent packs, to both adults and children. The review showed that people associated personality characteristics with brands and the kind of people that smoke them, such as 'cool' and 'popular'.

Australia became the first country to introduce standardised packaging in December 2012 as part of their comprehensive approach to tobacco control programme, which includes addressing tobacco marketing as well as sustained tobacco tax increases. Data from Australia are encouraging; demonstrating the positive impact of tobacco control in the country:

- Between 2010 and 2013 - the period in which standard packs were introduced - Australia saw a 15 per cent reduction in smoking prevalence. Data also confirms that fewer young people are taking up the habit[11,12].
- Figures from the Australian Department of Health show that tobacco consumption in the first quarter of 2014 was the lowest ever recorded.[13]
- Official Australian Treasury figures reveal a significant 5% drop in cigarettes sold per head of population in the first year since standard packs have been introduced.[14]

In April 2014, the independent review undertaken by paediatrician Sir Cyril Chantler ('the Chantler Review') reported. Publishing its findings the author concluded: "Having reviewed the evidence it is in my view highly likely that standardised packaging would serve to reduce the rate of children taking up smoking and implausible that it would increase the consumption of tobacco". The Chantler Review also praised the methods and findings of the systematic review: "The Stirling Review constitutes the most extensive and authoritative piece of work on the issue of standardised packaging yet undertaken"[15].

Above: An illustration of standardised packaging published alongside draft regulations

Standardised packaging and the illicit tobacco market
The tobacco industry has claimed that the introduction of standardised packaging of tobacco products would result in an increase in counterfeit cigarettes[16]. However, independent experts the measure is likely to have no significant impact on the level of illicit trade[17,18,19]. International tobacco smuggling expert, Luk Joossens, who has advised the World Bank, the European Commission and the World Health Organization (WHO) on the issue concluded that: "Plain [standardised] packaging will not make any difference to the counterfeit business"[20]. An impact assessment on the effect of standardised packaging written by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), reported: "We have seen no evidence to suggest the introduction of standardised packaging will have a significant impact on the overall size of the illicit market or prompt a step-change in the activity of organised crime groups".[21] Official figures from HMRC show that the illicit cigarette market has more than halved (to 10%) since peaking in 2000/01.[22,23]

Research published in the BMJ Open which looked at the use of illicit tobacco since the introduction of standardised packaging in Australia, found that the use of illicit tobacco had not increased in the period during which the measure was implemented (2011-13)[24]. The Chantler Review[25] similarly dismissed tobacco industry research which claimed that illicit trade had increased in Australia since the measure's introduction in December 2012[26].

A comprehensive strategy to address tobacco marketing
Standardised packaging will be implemented across all four nations of the UK in May 2016, mandating that all cigarettes and rolling tobacco products are sold in drab green packaging stripped of their novel marketing features, which evidence consistently demonstrates serves to reduce the appeal of tobacco products to young people[27,28]. Standardised packaging is the latest step in a tobacco control strategy which, through a cumulative series of measures, has been the catalyst for the sustained reduction of UK smoking rates since the 1970s[29].
Efforts to address tobacco advertising and marketing have been a particular success of the last 15 years, beginning with the EU Tobacco Products Directive of 2001[30] and the UK Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act in 2002[31].

Tobacco point of sale (PoS) displays were removed from large shops across the UK between April 2012 and 2013, with removal extended to all retailers across the UK in April 2015. CRUK commissioned research, which surveyed retailer preparations for the removal of point of sale tobacco displays from small retailers (in England)[32] used interview data with shopkeepers across London and Newcastle, to assess views and planned response to upcoming PoS regulations. In its key findings the report found that the vast majority of retailers were prepared for implementation, with 40% of retailers also signalling a desire to reduce their reliance on tobacco sales more generally; 94% of retailers acknowledged that they made little profit from selling tobacco.

The report also audited the display of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) in these shops, finding that the most prominently displayed e-cigarette brands were owned by the tobacco industry. However there did not seem to be a coordinated approach between tobacco brands and the company's respective e-cigarette brands i.e. tobacco PoS displays were not being systematically replaced with e-cigarette displays (either by tobacco industry associated or independent e-cigarette brands).

The tobacco industry has also made claims of increased product retrieval times, in their opposition to standardised packaging in Australia. However, an empirical study of retrieval times in small stores in Australia following the implementation of standardised packaging found that retrieval time returned to the baseline range *'by the second week of implementation, remaining so several months later'*[33]. This suggests that tobacco retailers quickly adapt to changes in legislation relating to the storage and display of tobacco products. The removal of PoS displays, alongside the introduction of standardised packaging have different but complementary outcomes. Standardised packaging makes tobacco products less appealing and health warnings more prominent to children, while removing PoS displays diminishes the social norm of smoking among young people.

An impact assessment from the European Commission which used an input/output model estimated that a 2% reduction of tobacco consumption across the EU would lead to a net gain in employment as industries benefit from the money that was being spent tobacco, redirected to other goods and services which are more labour intensive (e.g. hospitality)[34].

Standardised packaging around the world
In a 2012 speech, WHO Director, Dr Margaret Chan, urged countries to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with Australia in supporting their pioneering introduction of standardised packaging of tobacco products. Following Australia, a number of countries are now at various stages of introducing standardised packaging. The measure will be introduced across the UK on 20 May 2016, alongside the implementation of a raft of tobacco control measures agreed in the EU Tobacco Products Directive[35]. The Republic of Ireland will also implement its standardised packaging legislation on the same date[36].

In March 2015, France gave formal notice to the European Commission of the inclusion of standardised packaging within its domestic health bill, following adoption by the National Assembly[37]. However, a final text is unlikely to be agreed until September 2015. In New Zealand a Government Bill was approved by the Health Committee in August 2014, but the Bill is yet to be brought back to Parliament for approval, pending the outcome of tobacco industry legal challenges which have been taken against Australia. In Norway, the Government announced a public consultation on standardised packaging (and Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control) in February 2015[38]. Sweden[39], Finland[40], Singapore[41] and South Africa[42] are among the other countries who have signalled that the policy is under active consideration.

The tobacco industry has a history of using legal avenues to challenge tobacco control legislation, including ongoing investor state dispute settlement cases against Uruguay[43] and Australia[44]. It is anticipated that tobacco companies will launch legal action in an attempt to block, delay or amend the legislation in the UK[45]. The tobacco industry has argued that standardised packaging would infringe on its intellectual property rights[46], a dispute which has already been tested in Australia where the domestic High Court dismissed their claim.[47] International trade agreements declare that they should not be interpreted in a way which prevents implementation of public health measures[48].

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