

# Is Plain Packaging the Way Forward?

Soumyadeep Bhaumik

Journal of Indian Medical Association, Kolkata, India\*

## ABSTRACT

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Tobacco is the leading global cause of preventable death and kills nearly 6 million people and causes hundreds of billions of dollars of economic damage globally. The fact that tobacco is addictive, and that that smoking and second hand smoke cause a wide variety of diseases most notably cancers of all kind has been known for decades already. The tobacco industry has employed sophisticated lawyer, public relation firms, corporate lobbyists—and even scientists and doctors—to distort the scientific and political process.

All this makes the world a place where “nearly every new drug is subjected to rigorous scrutiny as a potential carcinogen, and even the bare hint of a substance’s link to cancer ignites a firestorm of public hysteria and media anxiety—one of the most potent and common carcinogens (tobacco) known to humans can be freely bought and sold at every corner store for a few dollars”.

Plain packaging entails the use of a only standard type fonts in a single colour on a plain background to provide minimum information necessary to identify a product, without the use of any logos, colours, designs, images or even stylized fonts of additional descriptive terms<sup>1</sup>(Figure 1). Thus all cigarette packets will look the same irrespective of their brand

Prohibiting the use of logos, colours, brand images and other promotional information are proven and well researched modalities of tobacco control. Plain packaging just another step in this direction-probably the best bet to blanket ban on tobacco products. The plainer the package (ie. without any logos, colours, brand images or other promotional materials) fewer is the branding elements and hence greater will be the impact of pictorial health warnings.

**Keywords:** Plain packaging standardized packaging, Cigarette, Anti-smoking, Tobacco control, Australian health policy.

\*See End Note for complete author details

## THE FACTS

Tobacco is the leading global cause of preventable death and kills nearly 6 million people and causes hundreds of billions of dollars of economic damage globally.<sup>1</sup> The WHO predicts that if current trends continue, by 2030 tobacco will kill more than 8 million people worldwide each year, with 80% of these premature deaths occurring among people living in low- and middle-income countries. Tobacco kills one in two of its long-term users.<sup>1</sup> More deaths are caused each year by tobacco use than by the combined number of deaths from human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), illegal drug use, alcohol use, motor vehicle injuries, suicides, and murders combined.<sup>2,3</sup>

### The Dilemma

The fact that tobacco is addictive, and that that smoking and second hand smoke cause a wide variety of diseases most notably cancers of all kind has been known for decades already. The tobacco industry has employed sophisticated lawyer, public relation firms, corporate lobbyists—and even scientists and doctors—to distort

the scientific and political process.<sup>4,5</sup> There has been even evidence<sup>6</sup> that in 1977 seven tobacco companies conspired together in an exercise called Operation Berkshire to cloud and counter the growing evidence of the association of tobacco with various diseases. In fact tobacco companies were long aware of these facts, covered up its own research on the dangers of tobacco use and the addictiveness of nicotine for long.<sup>7</sup> Not only that they have also employed their chemists to enhance the addictiveness of nicotine even at the cost of adding known carcinogens.<sup>8</sup> The problem is more so in developing nations where governments cannot take a tough stand on these issues owing to the enormous revenues and employment opportunities it generates. Governments collect nearly US\$ 133 billion in tobacco excise tax revenues, but spend less than US\$ 1 billion on tobacco control, a deficit that is most evident in low- and middle income countries.<sup>1</sup> What they fail to see is the fact that in terms of long term health costs, mortality, morbidity and loss of economically viable human resource the costs are actually higher. Cigarette companies are notorious for using their wealth to influence politicians to create a favourable environment

### Corresponding Author:

Dr. Soumyadeep Bhaumik, Medical Sub-Editor, Journal of Indian Medical Association & Independent Medical Researcher, Kolkata, India. E-mail: soumyadeepbhaumik@rediffmail.com

to promote smoking.<sup>9</sup> All this makes the world a place where “nearly every new drug is subjected to rigorous scrutiny as a potential carcinogen, and even the bare hint of a substance’s link to cancer ignites a firestorm of public hysteria and media anxiety—one of the most potent and common carcinogens (tobacco) known to humans can be freely bought and sold at every corner store for a few dollars”.<sup>10</sup>

### **Plain Packaging: the weapons grade public health policy ...**

Plain packaging entails the use of a only standard type fonts in a single colour on a plain background to provide minimum information necessary to identify a product, without the use of any logos, colours, designs, images or even stylized fonts of additional descriptive terms.<sup>1</sup> Thus all cigarette packets will look the same irrespective of their brand Australia’s plain packaging legislation which is scheduled to be rolled starting December 2012 has been described “as a weapons-grade public health policy that is causing apoplexy in the international industry.”<sup>11</sup>

This legislation has been projected by the cigarette companies to be of one without any evidence.<sup>11,12</sup> But in fact this plain packaging (also called standardized packaging) is backed by solid research. Consumer research clearly indicate that tobacco advertising has a powerful effect on the smoking attitudes and behaviour of young people— more so if imagery or positive association was used for it.<sup>13-14</sup> Children are also brand conscious and are more likely to smoke the most popular and well advertised products as compared to the others which are not branded.<sup>15-17</sup> Even sponsorship in the way of sportspersons or events has been to shown to have an influence and recruit young people regarding smoking.<sup>18</sup> Plain packaging nips the problem at bud- no branding, no advertisements, no sponsorships. As a result of WHO and its member governments tightening its act on advertising (direct as well as surrogate) and sponsorships by way of legislations the tobacco industry is left with very few options of promoting themselves. The cigarette packet thus now the main reliable source of branding and marketing<sup>1</sup> Plain packaging by including data about compositions also increases accurate perceptions of the risk of tobacco<sup>1</sup> use thereby respecting a citizen’s right to information. Studies have already indicated that it will decrease smoking rates.<sup>19</sup> Prohibiting the use of logos, colours, brand images and other promotional information are proven and well researched modalities of tobacco control. Plain packaging just another step in this direction-probably the best bet to blanket ban

on tobacco products. The plainer the package (ie. without any logos, colours, brand images or other promotional materials) fewer is the branding elements and hence greater will be the impact of pictorial health warnings.<sup>20</sup> Moreover Australia has always been a pioneer in the field of tobacco control and there is no reason to doubt their policies and programming on tobacco control now. Australia introduced graphic health warning labels in 2006 that caused more than half of its smokers to believe that they had an increased risk of dying from smoking-related illness, and 38% felt motivated to quit.<sup>21</sup> In 2011 the number of Australian smokers stood at an all time low of only 15.1%.<sup>11</sup>

Nations worldwide should respond to the call by WHO<sup>22</sup> to show solidarity with the Australian government. They should act out similar legislations in their own lands and prove that governments do put the health of its citizens before the interests of “an industry known for its dirty trick and its dirty laundries”.<sup>23</sup>

### **END NOTE**

#### **Author Information**

Dr. Soumyadeep Bhaumik,  
Medical Sub-Editor, Journal of Indian Medical Association & Independent Medical Researcher,  
Kolkata, India.  
E-mail: soumyadeepbhaumik@rediffmail.com

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