

Distribution of new graphic warning labels: Are tobacco companies following regulations?

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Abstract

Objective: To test the hypothesis that tobacco companies would not follow a regulation that required seven new graphic health warnings (GHWs) to be evenly distributed on cigarette packs and that they would distribute fewer packs featuring warnings regarded by smokers as being more disturbing.

Methods: Cross-sectional survey of purchased packs ($n = 168$) and street-collected discarded packs (convenience sample of New Zealand cities and towns, $n = 1208$ packs) with statistical analysis of seven types of new GHWs. *A priori* warning impact was judged using three criteria, which were tested against data from depth interviews with retailers.

Results: The GHWs on the purchased packs and street-collected packs both showed a distribution pattern that was generally consistent with the hypothesis ie, there were disproportionately more packs featuring images judged as "least disturbing" and disproportionately fewer of those with warnings judged "more disturbing". The overall patterns were statistically significant, suggesting an unequal frequency of the different warnings for both purchased ($p < 0.0001$) and street-collected packs ($p = 0.035$). One of the least disturbing images (of a "corpse with toe-tag") dominated the distribution in both samples. Further analysis of the street-collected packs revealed that this image appeared disproportionately more frequently on manufactured cigarettes made by each of the three largest New Zealand tobacco companies. Although stock clustering could explain the purchase pack result, there were no obvious reasons why the same uneven warning distribution was also evident among the street-collected packs.

Conclusion: These results suggest that tobacco companies are not following the regulations, which requires even distribution of the seven different GHWs on cigarette packs; further monitoring is required to estimate the extent of this non-compliance. As an immediate measure, governments should strictly enforce all regulations applying to health warnings, particularly given that these are an effective tobacco control intervention that cost tax payers nothing.

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