

Editorial

Pictorial health warnings are a must for effective tobacco control

The theme for World No Tobacco Day, this year is “Tobacco Health Warnings”, the slogan being “Show The Truth. Picture Warnings Save Lives”. Only 25 countries in the world today have legislation on mandatory tobacco health warnings on all tobacco product packages. However, the number will soon go up as many countries will start implementing the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 2003. The need for health warnings on tobacco products packs is obvious as most tobacco users start this habit when they are not fully informed about adverse health consequences associated with this habit. When even a potentially life saving drug is mandated to inform consumers about its potential adverse effects, such disclosures should be mandatory for tobacco products which claimed over 5.4 million lives globally in 2008¹. Since the industry does not reveal the truth by itself, laws are needed to ensure that facts are provided to the many millions² who consume tobacco in one form or another in India?

The tobacco industry communicates with its target audience through ‘on pack advertising’. Packages are created to be highly appealing and divert attention from the harmful effects of tobacco products. Pictorial health warnings can effectively counter these promotional efforts by displaying highly unappealing images of the health effects of tobacco use. These will serve to inform the consumers and also clear any deceptive messaging used by the tobacco industry to market their products as ‘light’ or ‘mild’^{3,4}.

The FCTC provides a set of guidelines for controlling the demand and supply of tobacco. As its first guiding principle, FCTC states that “every person should be informed of the health consequences,

addictive nature and mortal threat posed by tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke.” FCTC directs member countries to implement a range of tobacco control policies, including provisions for packaging and labelling (Article 11). Packages of tobacco products must carry large, clear, visible and legible health warnings describing the harmful effects of tobacco use, occupying more than 30 per cent of the principal display area. Article 11 also suggests the inclusion of pictorial health warnings³. In the MPOWER technical assistance package developed by WHO, to assist countries to meet their commitments under FCTC, “W” stands for “warn about the dangers of tobacco”¹. FCTC’s recommendation for time bound implementation of these warnings underscores the importance of the provision. As per the Treaty obligation, all tobacco products in India should have had pack warnings from February 28, 2008 *i.e.*, within three years from the coming into force of the FCTC.

India enacted the “Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act” (COTPA) as a multi-measure law in 2003, while the world was still negotiating the FCTC. The law came into force from May 1, 2004, nearly a year ahead of coming into force of the FCTC. COTPA too stipulates depiction of pictorial health warnings on all tobacco products (Section 7). However, primarily due to lack of political will, the pictorial health warnings in India - experienced constant delay, deferral and dilution.

Evidence of effectiveness

The tobacco industry tries to avoid displaying effective pictorial health warnings and strongly opposed

its implementation in countries that have introduced such warnings, often questioning their effectiveness⁵. Evidence from these countries establishes the effectiveness of health warnings in aiding tobacco prevention and tobacco cessation⁵⁻⁷, demonstrating that they positively influence the knowledge and attitudes of both tobacco users and non users.

Evidence from Canada suggests that strong pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs have been successful in reducing the smoking frequency and have increased quit attempts among smokers especially by rousing negative emotions such as fear and disgust⁷. These warnings have been reported by 58 per cent of smokers to have made them think about the health effects of smoking⁸. Most popular among such messages were pictures depicting cancer of the mouth⁹. Overall, extensive research in Canada suggests that large (>50% of the surface of principal display area) and strongly worded health warnings, supported by emotionally strong graphics, are highly effective in tobacco control¹⁰⁻¹². As a result of pictorial health warnings, motivation to quit has been reported by 67 per cent of smokers in Brazil¹³, 44 per cent of smokers in Thailand¹⁴, while 67 per cent made a quit attempt in New Zealand¹⁵. Both current and former smokers have reported that health risks associated with smoking provided the strongest motivation for them to quit and also best predicted long term abstinence⁵.

Graphic warnings provide health information

Pictorial health warnings on tobacco products are an important source of conveying information on adverse health effects of tobacco use and on constituents of tobacco products^{16,17}. A smoker who smokes 20 cigarettes per day is potentially exposed 7,300 times/year to the pictorial warnings¹⁸. The time and situation of exposure is very opportune. Smokers get exposed while buying and every time they remove a cigarette, bidi or chewing tobacco from the pack. Graphic warnings describe the impact of tobacco use in a vivid manner. They interrupt the automaticity of tobacco use behaviour and create cues for thinking about quitting.

Pictures speak a thousand words

Since tobacco consumption in India is inversely related to education and is the highest among the illiterate and low literate groups¹⁹, pictorial health warnings will help to reduce the disparities in health knowledge by providing the poor and rural tobacco users with regular access to health information.

Evidence shows that unpleasant, threatening pictures of tobacco related health effects, such as a cancerous lung or an amputated leg, capture attention and induce tobacco avoidance⁶. Unfortunately, currently notified Indian warnings are not as per WHO's recommended best practices and may not bring about the desired impact.

Pictorial health warnings are easiest to implement and most cost-effective policy measure

Health warnings are appealing for two reasons: (i) low cost to governments in implementing this policy measure, as the cost is borne by the tobacco industry, and (ii) health messages are able to reach a large audience. These are also highly cost-effective as compared to other strategies, as shown by the International Tobacco Control Survey (ITC-4) conducted in four countries - the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. Influenced by pack warnings on impotence, Canadians reported this knowledge at the same level as respondents from California, where \$2.2 million were spent on mass media campaigns conveying this message⁵.

Pictorial health warnings change the perception of risk

Tobacco users are inadequately informed about the risks related to tobacco use, underestimate the risk and are unable to personalize these risks. Assertions by tobacco industry representatives that tobacco users are adequately informed about the health risks of tobacco use have been disproved by the four country study⁵. Smokers in these highly literate countries had insufficient knowledge of the risks and diseases associated with smoking. Knowledge levels are likely to be even lower in India, where illiteracy is high and resources for health communication are limited. Health warnings assist tobacco users in correctly identifying the health risks from tobacco use and move them towards the contemplation and action stages of a quitting attempt.

Pictures break the linguistic barriers

Given 22 different official languages in India, pictorial health warnings (depicting health impact) would serve to universally communicate the same message to all tobacco consumers in all States of India, overcoming the linguistic diversity.

Pictorial health warnings in India: Struggle between trade and health

In July 2006, pictorial pack warnings were notified, by the Union Health Ministry, to come into

force from February, 2007. The tobacco industry orchestrated opposition to this measure, claiming that religious feelings were offended by the depiction of the skull and cross bones on tobacco product packages, a provision mandated by COTPA. Political compulsions led to the constitution of a Group of Ministers (GoM), empowered to resolve the issue and enable the implementation of the notification. Unfortunately, this initiated a protracted process of progressive dilution. Fourteen subsequent notifications have watered down the tobacco health warnings considerably in India. The Act of 2003 was amended, to remove the provision related to display of skull and cross bones. The GoM then suggested three very weak and poorly communicative pictorial health warnings to replace those recommended by the Union Health Ministry. They then reduced the size of the warnings from 50 to 40 per cent of the principal display areas on both sides of tobacco product packages. In April-May 2009, the GoM further modified the rules to prescribe a 40 per cent warning size on one principal display area only, effectively cutting down the total display area on the pack to 20 per cent. This was notified on May 3, 2009.

Legal developments on pictorial health warnings in India

The process of implementing pictorial warnings on all tobacco packages was initiated with a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), in the High Court of Himachal Pradesh in December 2004. On repeated directives from the Shimla High Court, the Government of India (GoI) notified the Rules on Packaging and Labelling in July 2006. Law suits against the GoI were filed by various tobacco manufacturers, in High Courts all over India, challenging the validity of the Packaging and Labelling Rules of July 5, 2006 and September 29, 2007. In order to speed up the process of implementation of pictorial warnings, GoI filed a Transfer Petition on May 2008 in the Supreme Court and requested the Supreme Court to transfer to itself 31 petitions pending all over India. The Supreme Court accepted the Transfer Petition. An NGO (Health for Millions) filed an Intervention Application in this Transfer Petition, pleading for early and effective implementation of pictorial warnings. The Supreme Court ruled in this matter on May 6, 2009, ordering the implementation of pictorial health warnings, as approved by the GoM, from May 31, 2009. At last, a partial victory was won by the tobacco control advocates.

Challenges ahead

A challenge which still lies ahead, even after pictorial health warnings start appearing on tobacco products, will be the loose sale of cigarettes and bidis. The government would need to simultaneously frame policies to curb the sale of singles, a common practice in India where poor consumers cannot afford to buy full packs. Otherwise, a tobacco user will miss the opportunity of receiving health information from tobacco product packages.

Conclusion

The need of the hour is a strong demand for immediate implementation of the already notified health warnings even though they are not strong enough. This needs to be followed by advocacy, based on field research on the limited impact of the weak warnings, for replacement with stronger pictorial health warnings. The tobacco industry's opposition to tobacco health warnings is understandable as they fear that strong warning labels will adversely affect their business. However, policymakers and governmental agencies, whose primary duty is public health protection, should not evade their responsibility to mandate strong health warnings on all tobacco product packs. The World No Tobacco Day should serve to remind us all that nearly 10 lakh Indians die every year²⁰ due to smoking and health warnings are an effective way to combat the menace of tobacco.

K. Srinath Reddy* & Monika Arora

Public Health Foundation of India
PHD House, 2nd Floor
4/2, Sirifort Institutional Area
August Kranti Marg
New Delhi 110 016, India

*For correspondence:
ksrinath.reddy@phfi.org

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