

A picture says more than a thousand words

Recommendations for pictorial warnings on tobacco products in Germany

Background

In the mid 1990s German tobacco corporations filed proceedings with the Federal Constitutional Court opposing the obligation to print warnings concerning the health risks of smoking on tobacco packages. In its judgement dated 22nd January 1997 the Federal Constitutional Court ascertained that "warning about the health risks involved... (is) among the legitimate duties of the state" and "this state role of education thus serves to protect the public from health risks(...) The warnings are designed to at least dissuade consumers from unconditional consumption of tobacco". Germany's supreme court thus emphatically rejected the attempts of the tobacco industry to annul the textual warnings that had already been introduced by means of a constitutional appeal, thus paving the way for introduction of new warnings.

Since then the EU has recommended to print, in addition to the textual warnings on the front of cigarette packages, also pictorial warnings, which vividly depict the consequences of smoking and passive smoking, on the reverse (2003/641/EC). These new pictorial warnings were already introduced in Belgium in 2006 and are to be introduced in the United Kingdom in 2008. Further EU Member States are considering whether they should introduce them. Germany should go one step further and follow the latest recommendations by WHO experts, which require a warning image on the top 50% of the front and reverse of the package that is supplemented by an explanatory text and the contact details of a quitline.

Warnings on cigarette packages are effective

Many smokers are not adequately informed as to the specific health risks involved in tobacco smoking and underestimate them.

- **Warnings are informative**

Warnings inform smokers directly and continually, as they are seen every time a smoker lifts the packet.

- **Pictorial warnings are visible to everyone**

Social groups that read either rarely or not at all do not perceive text-based health messages, with the result that health awareness in these groups is low. Pictorial warnings are particularly effective in reaching precisely these social groups who are resistant to messages. Pictorial warnings also reach smokers who do not speak the national language or who cannot read.

- **Warnings promote quitting**

Warnings on tobacco products can also help smokers to quit and can also dissuade potential smokers from starting to smoke.

Recommendations for new warnings

- **The bigger, the better**

Warnings should occupy 50% of the front and reverse of a cigarette package.

- **A picture says more than a thousand words**

A message in pictorial form is comprehended more quickly and is easier to understand than a text. It is also better memorised.

- **Combined text and photograph**

Combined textual and pictorial warnings are the most effective.

- **Simple, clear messages**

Warnings should point out the health risks to smokers as well as the health risks to other persons as a result of passive smoking. In addition, warnings should also communicate non-health-related messages, such as "quitting smoking saves money".

- **Photographs trigger emotions**

The warnings should trigger an emotional reaction, as such a reaction is better memorised and acts as a prompt to consider the health risks.

- **Motivation to quit smoking**

All warnings should be supplemented by a quitline number.

- **Regular rotation**

Warnings should be rotated regularly at short intervals (i.e. two to three years). By rotating the warnings, information about new scientific evidence can be improved continually, thus also avoiding familiarisation.

- **Warnings on the top of the package**

As the bottom of the cigarette package is mostly concealed in supermarket displays, the new warnings should under all circumstances be printed on the top part of the package, as this is the only way to ensure that they are seen by millions of customers every day.

- **Removal of deceptive information of tobacco manufacturers**

Mechanical measurement of tar and nicotine values in accordance with the ISO standards does not give any indication as to the absorption of such substances by the smoker. Thus nicotine administration can be up to eight times higher than the mechanically determined values due to the individual's smoking behaviour. In addition the consumer misinterprets the statistics relating to tar and nicotine content.



Colour photograph appearing on 50% of the total area in the top of the front and reverse

Explanatory text

A quitline contact number is included

• Additional health information on the side of packages

The misleading manufacturers' information on tar and nicotine content on the side of packages should be replaced

by easy-to-understand information, such as: "Smoking exposes you to thousands of toxins" and "These substances harm blood vessels, blood cells and the immune system".



Examples of warnings using combined photographs and texts. (European Union recommendations, http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/Tobacco/Documents/uk_pictures.pdf)

Cheapest counter-advertising

A smoker with a daily consumption of a packet of 20 cigarettes is confronted with warnings at least 7000 to 8000 times a year. With an annual sales turnover of more than 6.5 billion packets of cigarettes in Germany, this is equivalent to more than 100 billion contacts. **Warnings are thus the most significant and most cost-effective means of health education: they reach each smoker and the costs are borne by the manufacturers, not the public.**

Pictorial warnings are effective

Experiences from various countries confirm that large health warnings on tobacco packages, comprising combined text and photograph, are effective:

- Smokers in countries where **pictorial** warnings exist are better informed about the risks of smoking than smokers in countries with **text**-based warnings. Thus almost 60% of Canadian smokers, where at the time of the study 16 large pictorial warnings rotated on packages, and only about 36% of UK smokers, where six different text warnings take up 6% of the package, were aware that smoking leads to impotence.
- The better informed smokers are about the health risks, the more they want to quit smoking (according to surveys in Canada, Australia, USA, UK).
- In Australia smokers almost without exception considered combined textual and pictorial warnings to be an effective means of communicating health information compared to only text-based warnings.
- Smokers and non-smokers believe that the photographs, which are most likely to have a dissuasive effect, are those featuring images of diseased teeth and lung tumours on Canadian cigarette packages or the image of lung cancer and a premature baby on Brazilian tobacco products.

- Canadian studies show that alarming and/or repulsive pictures more often make smokers examine the pictorial warnings and that the probability of quitting smoking is thus increased.
- In Canada particularly young people found the pictorial warnings to be an effective means of conveying information (9 out of 10 young people compared to 7 out of 10 adults).
- According to a survey in Canada, approximately 20% of smokers smoked fewer cigarettes as a result of the deterrent warnings.
- In another Canadian survey 31% of smokers stated that pictorial warnings motivated them to quit smoking in the near future.
- In addition, 27% of successful quitters reported that the warnings were a successful deterrent against relapse.

High acceptance of warnings among population

- The vast majority of the population accept warnings fundamentally. Experience from other countries demonstrates that up to 80% of all non-smokers and 70% of all smokers consider them to be important.
- Up to 80% of all smokers believe that the introduction of warnings has had an effect on their behaviour. These informed smokers are more likely to attempt to quit and succeed in quitting. Particularly if warnings point out in a very vivid way the health risks for the smoker and for their environment due to passive smoking and, if possible, trigger an emotional reaction, they can motivate smokers to quit smoking and keep potential smokers from consuming.

Warnings must be eye-catching and occupy as large an area of the package as possible. The larger and more eye-catching the warnings, the better they are noticed and can communicate information about health risks – and the less space they leave for displaying the cigarette brand.

Published by:

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Citing:
Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum (Ed.):
A picture says more than a thousand words: Recommendations for pictorial warnings on tobacco products in Germany
Heidelberg, 2007