“If government can’t stop the smokes, no way we can stop selling them”: why retailers want Government to act

Emmanuel Badu, Erin Fowler

The recent Director-General of Health’s Report on the State of Public Health highlighted the insufficient actions and progress towards achieving the smoke-free 2025 goal. Smoking prevalence trends show the goal may be missed and more substantially for vulnerable populations such as Māori and Pacific peoples. In the Auckland region, the decline in adult daily smoking rate has been slow (from 13.2% in 2011/12 to 11.2% in 2016/17) with persistent ethnic (Māori=32.7%, Pacific=22.1%) and socioeconomic (quintile 1=6.7% vs quintile 5=19.5%) inequities. While this may not be new to players within the tobacco control sector, it brings into sharp focus the need for sustainable but radical approaches if the goal, now perceived through media debates as just a ‘myth’, is to be achieved.

Greatly reducing the availability of tobacco has been suggested as an important end game strategy for maximum gains. It can contribute to reducing the likelihood of minors purchasing tobacco, initiation and uptake by young people and adults alike. Retailers voluntarily stopping the sale of tobacco seem to be on the rise in places such as Northland, although the same cannot be said for other places such as Auckland and Christchurch. For instance, Martin and colleagues in their recent publication reported the majority of their respondents were not interested in becoming tobacco-free retailers, leading them to conclude “that unless consistency across all types of tobacco retail outlets is adopted and the sale of tobacco is regulated further, any progress in tobacco-free retailing is likely to be slow and piecemeal.”

In this letter we share preliminary findings from an Auckland study that suggests retailers are likely to support government legislation that only permits the sale of tobacco from a few specialist stores that only sell tobacco. We sought to explore retailers’ perceptions about alternative business models that could replace selling tobacco by randomly selecting 19 dairy owners from six of the 21 local boards in Auckland. We then selected two local boards each from the lowest, median and highest categories. We randomly selected names of dairy shops using an online random number generator. The numbers generated corresponded to names of dairy shops from the retailer database obtained from the ASPIRE2025 team at Otago.

The dairy owners interviewed shared emotional attachment to their businesses, had owned and/or managed a dairy shop for a minimum of about a month to a maximum of over 35 years, and were predominantly family-owned businesses. They expressed strong sentiments about operating a legitimate business that required long hours of hard work to support their families. While the majority of them, especially smaller dairy owners were worried about having to stop selling tobacco, they believed the decision to stop depended “entirely on government”. Among other concerns raised were participants’ frustrations about the government’s inaction to the point they doubted its commitment to protecting people from the harm of smoking. They
believed that the only ‘party’ that gained from tobacco tax increases was government, while they (the retailers) lived in fear of robbery and inability to pay their bills. They explained that the profit margins on tobacco were minimal, however it was an important product for their ‘turnover’ and overall profit, suggesting that many retailers will be unwilling to give up on their own. They were convinced that deciding to stop selling tobacco depended entirely on the government because giving up as an individual business would mean losing customers to other retailers who continued to sell tobacco. They emphasised that removing tobacco from all dairies, convenience stores and supermarkets will lead to a fair competition among shops and push retailers to focus more on other main retail items, improving customer care and providing more of what customers need. Such a stance by dairy owners clearly calls for a government response to ban tobacco in retail outlets as a sign of its commitment to achieving smokefree 2025.

Although the qualitative method used in this study meant we did not focus on generalisable results, the findings reveal dairy owners inherent mistrust of the government’s commitment to tobacco control and suggest dairy owners may be more likely to comply with government legislation that bans tobacco sales in dairies. The perceptions of retailers in this study are similar to previous local studies and reinforce expert opinion about the limitation of the voluntary approach, one that seeks to encourage individual retailers to quit selling tobacco.

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Author information:
Emmanuel Badu, Health Promoter, Health Improvement Team, Auckland Regional Public Health Services, Auckland; Erin Fowler, Health Promoter, Health Improvement Team, Auckland Regional Public Health Services, Auckland.

Corresponding author:
Dr Emmanuel Badu, Health Promoter, Health Improvement Team, Auckland Regional Public Health Services, Cornwall Complex, Building 15 (Level 2), Greenlane Clinical Centre, Greenlane, Auckland.
emmanuelb@adhb.govt.nz

URL:

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