



## **Recent changes in cigarette packaging in New Zealand may continue to mislead smokers**

The New Zealand Commerce Commission is currently undertaking an enquiry into the terms “light” and “mild” on tobacco products. This is an important issue from a public health and a consumer rights perspective. However, we fear that focusing only on the descriptor as a potentially misleading method of communicating about the product to consumers is inadequate, and that the review should encompass other communication methods including pack colouring.

Epidemiological evidence suggests that the health outcomes from smoking light or mild cigarettes are as grave and as common as those from smoking other cigarettes.<sup>1</sup> International research however, has shown that many smokers do not understand that light cigarettes are just as hazardous as regular cigarettes, and many believe that smoking “light” or “mild” cigarettes has a much lower health risk.<sup>2-6</sup>

In countries where these misleading descriptors have already been banned, the tobacco companies have side-stepped the legislation by using colour-coding to create different pack colours for different versions within the same brand family. This is apparent in Europe with “Lucky Strike Silver”, and in Australia with “Winfield Green”. Research we have conducted in New Zealand has shown that there is a strong relationship between the dominant colour of the pack and the brand labelling and type of cigarette. For example, red is associated with ‘regular’ cigarettes; white, silver, and blue with ‘light’ and ‘mild’ variants; and green with menthol cigarettes.<sup>7</sup>

In New Zealand, where misleading tobacco descriptors have been common,<sup>8</sup> there are signs that tobacco companies are anticipating the banning of mild and light descriptors by the increasing use of such colour coding and removal of descriptors. We have conducted monthly surveillance of brands for sale in an on-line supermarket website and in other settings. In July 2007, British American Tobacco (BAT) introduced “Dunhill Fine Cut Navy” (in blue packaging) and “Dunhill Fine Cut White” (in white packaging). BAT also introduced “Kent Blue”, “Kent Silver”, and “Kent Gold” in August 2007; and in November 2007, BAT re-labelled all their “Holiday” brand variants from “Filter”, “Mild”, “Menthol”, and “Menthol Mild” to Holiday “Red”, “Blue”, “Dark Green”, and “Green” respectively.

Given that there is New Zealand evidence that cigarette pack colour communicates information about the cigarettes that may be misleading (such as implying they are lighter or milder<sup>7</sup>), then these recent changes in labelling are of concern.

In order to minimise potential deception, it is highly desirable that all aspects of pack design (including colour, shape, and wording) are considered when recommending legislation banning “mild” and “light” descriptors.

Jo Peace  
Research Manager  
([jo.peace@otago.ac.nz](mailto:jo.peace@otago.ac.nz))

Nick Wilson  
Senior Lecturer

George Thomson  
Senior Research Fellow

Richard Edwards  
Senior Lecturer

Department of Public Health  
University of Otago, Wellington

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