Riding in cars with boys, and girls, while smoking...in New Zealand

Frank Houghton, Bruce Duncan, Diane O’Doherty

Tobacco control has clearly been identified by the Governments of both New Zealand1 and Ireland2 as major national priorities. Given the significant toll on both morbidity and mortality arising from cigarettes,3-8 ‘the deadliest artifact in the history of human civilisation’,7 such attention is to be commended. Such a focus is particularly laudable given the often successful subversive tactics routinely employed by Big Tobacco to undermine tobacco control.9-10 Both countries have set broadly similar targets for becoming smoke free (ie having a smoking rate of less than 5%) with Ireland’s official target for this achievement being 2020,2 with New Zealand following shortly behind with a target date of 2025.1

There are many similarities between Ireland and New Zealand including population size, English as the dominant spoken language (both countries also have other official languages as well), an economic focus on both agriculture and tourism and historic links with Britain as well as other cultural similarities and sporting interests.

It has been suggested that although New Zealand has received significant international praise and recognition for being a global leader in tobacco control,11 Ireland’s similar achievements have been largely overlooked.12 Ireland’s entrance onto the global stage of tobacco control occurred in 2004 when it became the first country in the world to implement a national workplace smoking ban. New Zealand followed suit approximately nine months later.

As can be seen from the examples of tobacco control activities introduced by New Zealand and Ireland outlined in Table 1, the two countries have often been relatively matched on this issue, with New Zealand having led the field in earlier years.

Both Ireland14 and Aotearoa/New Zealand15 are also currently in the process of introducing plain packaging for cigarettes, an issue fraught with legal challenges from the tobacco industry.

Although there are encouraging trends, smoking remains an issue in both countries. Results from the 2014/15 New Zealand Health Survey indicate a current smoking rate in the 15 years and over total population of 16.6% (18.2% among males and

Table 1: Sample of comparable tobacco control activities in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Ireland by year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aotearoa/New Zealand13</th>
<th>Ireland12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963—Cigarette advertising banned on radio and television</td>
<td>1971—Tobacco Advertising banned on television</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974—Health warning introduced on cigarettes</td>
<td>1978—Tobacco Advertising banned on radio</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988—Ban on tobacco sales to anyone under 16 years</td>
<td>1988—Ban on tobacco sales to anyone under 16 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997—Ban on sales of cigarettes in packs of less than 20</td>
<td>1988—Ban on sales of cigarettes in packs of less than 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997—Ban on sales of tobacco products to anyone under 18 years</td>
<td>2002—Ban on sales of tobacco products to anyone under 18 years (implemented 2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004—Workplace smoking ban introduced</td>
<td>2004—Workplace smoking ban introduced</td>
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15% among females), with notably higher rates among Maori (38.1% overall) and Pacific (24.7%) populations, and noticeably lower rates in Asian groups (6.4% overall). Ireland’s smoking rate in 2014 was 21%, although this rate may have continued to drop. Between 2012 and 2014 Ireland experienced the highest reduction in the smoking rate of any country in the European Union, from 29% to 21%.17

Despite manifold similarities in tobacco control between Ireland and New Zealand one glaring difference evident relates to smoking in cars with children. Ireland introduced a law (the Protection of Children’s Health [Tobacco Smoke in Mechanically Propelled Vehicles] Act) banning smoking in cars with children on 1st January 2016,18 just three months after England and Wales introduced such a ban. New Zealand currently has no such ban in place and does not overtly appear to in the process of introducing such legislative protection for children.

This absence is glaring given that the negative impact of secondhand smoke is now widely accepted and the impact of smoking in cars well researched. It is perhaps ironic that some of the research supporting the ban on smoking in cars with children used internationally in campaigns by groups such as Tobacco Free Kids actually originates in New Zealand.19 There would be popular support for such legislation: 97% of respondents in the New Zealand Health and Lifestyle Survey in 2014 agreed with the statement “smoking in cars should be banned where children are in them”.20

Looking elsewhere internationally, it is perhaps notable that smoking in cars with children is already illegal in Australia and a number of other countries. In 2007 the American Academy of Pediatrics adopted a resolution calling for all State and local bodies to “support and advocate for changes in existing and local laws and policies that protect children from secondhand smoke exposure by prohibiting smoking in any vehicle while a legal minor (under 18 years of age) is in the vehicle”.21

Interestingly, although Ireland has introduced a legal ban on smoking in cars with children, it is notable that key stakeholders explain the impact of the law in non-confrontational, moral, normative and educational terms.22 It could perhaps be argued therefore that New Zealand’s current educational strategy to combat this issue is broadly similar to Ireland. While educational strategies are undoubtedly important, given the significant volume of evidence detailing the adverse effects and the vulnerability of the population involved, the addition of a robust and immediate legislative approach will underline societal attitudes to the protection of health in our children.

It is notable that wearing front seat belts became a legal requirement in New Zealand in 1975. From 1979, back seat belts had to be fitted in cars in New Zealand, with their use becoming mandatory a decade later in 1989.23 Few, if any, would now question the wisdom of such legislation. Similarly now is the time for action on the issue of smoking in cars with children in New Zealand. The moral/ethical, health and economic arguments behind such a move are unequivocal. A decade from now New Zealanders will undoubtedly ask “Why did it take so long?”

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Nil.

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