The Smokefree 2025 goal: an opportunity for the new government

Martin Witt, Richard Edwards, Janet Hoek, George Thomson

Mike Daube’s editorial challenges us all to see the Smokefree 2025 goal realised. Reducing smoking prevalence to fall below five percent among all population groups is undoubtedly bold, but needs to be if we are to overcome the smoking epidemic. Currently, smoking is estimated to cause around 5,000 deaths each year, and around 550,000 New Zealanders remain addicted to nicotine. We need the audacity to plan a future in which the tobacco industry and its lethal products no longer have a pernicious hold on our population’s health.

We agree with Daube’s observation that progress since the goal was adopted in 2011 has been slow. This is despite the legacy of the Māori Affairs Select Committee, whose members first recommended setting a Smokefree 2025 goal. The previous Government introduced some important policies, such as getting rid of point-of-sale tobacco displays, but focused mainly on increasing individual cessation help, with quit attempts largely stimulated by higher taxation. There has been no overall plan, insufficient new population level policies and inadequate resources allocated to tobacco control.

With a new Government, we now have an opportunity to introduce a coordinated, evidence-based strategy. Already there are some signs of progress. The Minister of Health quickly recognised that a clear path was required to achieve the 2025 goal, and now Associate Minister Salesa has committed to creating a plan.

The multi-level strategy Achieving Smokefree Aotearoa by 2025 (ASAP), launched last August, provides a clear roadmap for achieving the goal. ASAP 2025 drew on expertise from throughout the smokefree sector to create a plan that would reduce the incidence of smoking and create the first smokefree generation. Benefiting from wide consultation, particularly within the Māori and Pacific tobacco control sector, ASAP 2025 offers policymakers evidence-based options to accelerate progress.

To realise this progress, we need that extra push that can only be provided by Government itself. In the same way that the Australian government won accolades for their stance on introducing standardised packages, the New Zealand Government needs to demonstrate that sovereign rights to health should always take priority over the tobacco industry. Adopting the principles of the ASAP plan and resourcing the work would build on the work done throughout the tobacco control sector.

Now is the time for the Government to start breaking new ground. To date, addressing the issue of tobacco has largely focused on reducing demand for the product. We must intensify these efforts, but also address the availability of tobacco and start to regulate the product itself, so it is less appealing and less addictive. US Federal Drugs Administration has recently announced its intention to introduce policy measures in these areas.

Rather than sell a lethal product through thousands of outlets, we should limit distribution and sell tobacco from outlets with secure storage and trained adult staff. Selling tobacco only from outlets open only to those over 18 would remove the product from its current everyday place in the retail environment.

Using community wisdom to inform the delivery of cessation services to high prevalence communities, and increasing funding for these services by drawing on tobacco
excise tax, could enhance their reach and effectiveness, as well as reduce criticism directed at higher tobacco taxation as an effective measure, including the disproportionate effects on lower income groups.\textsuperscript{15} Greatly increased use of mass and social media to encourage quitting and discourage uptake should also be implemented.

The editorial gives pause for thought. Should we give up on the 2025 goal? Emphatically no! Doing so would betray the vast majority of smokers who want to quit.\textsuperscript{16–20} More particularly, abandoning the goal would be to betray Māori, who have suffered disproportionately from the impacts of tobacco. Abandoning the goal would also betray the vision of the Māori Affairs Select Committee, whose members conceived the 2025 goal.

So, we need the Government to step up quickly with action. Please Minister Salesa, we are waiting and there is no time to lose.

\textbf{Competing interests:}
Nil.

\textbf{Author information:}
Martin Witt, Cancer Society of New Zealand, Canterbury West Coast; Richard Edwards, Co-Director ASPIRE 2025, Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington; Janet Hoek, Co-Director ASPIRE 2025, Department of Marketing, University of Otago, Dunedin; George Thomson, Assoc. Professor [Research] Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington.

\textbf{Corresponding author:}
Martin Witt, c/o Cancer Society Centre, PO Box 13-450, Christchurch 8141. martin.witt@cancercwc.org.nz

\textbf{URL:}

\textbf{REFERENCES:}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item New Zealand Parliament. Inquiry into the tobacco industry in Aotearoa and the consequences of tobacco use for Māori. Report of the Māori Affairs Select Committee.
  \item Thomas R. No room for complacency if we are to kick smoking by 2025, Helen Clark says. Stuff. March 27, 2018. http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/102608415/no-room-for-complacency-if-were-to-reach-kick-smoking-by-2025-helen-clark-says
\end{enumerate}


