Standardised (plain) packaging: the time for implementation has come

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A systematic review of international evidence suggests standardised (‘plain’) packaging will decrease the appeal of smoking, increase the salience of on-pack warnings, and reduce misperceptions about the harms of smoking. Standardised packaging thus represents a vital measure governments should implement as part of a comprehensive approach, if they wish to end the smoking epidemic.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has endorsed standardised packaging as “a legitimate and effective tobacco control measure”, which “is fully in line with the spirit and intent of the outcome of the UN High-level Meeting, and ... in accordance with international legal obligations under the WHO FCTC”. The UK and Ireland have already passed legislation introducing standardised packaging, and other nations, including France and Norway, have announced plans to proceed with standardised packaging. Yet, despite this international momentum, and repeated statements from the previous Minister of Health that standardised packaging is “inevitable”, progress in implementing this measure here has not kept pace with other countries.

Given New Zealand was the first country to adopt a smokefree goal, it might also be expected to be at the vanguard of new tobacco control measures. However, although the Smoke-free Environments (Tobacco Plain Packaging) Amendment Bill, which passed its first reading on 11 February 2014 (118 votes to 1), was returned from the Health Select Committee on 5 August 2014, it still has no second reading date. Instead of moving quickly to pass this evidence-based legislation, which has strong and growing public support in New Zealand, the Government has stated its intention to await outcomes from two international legal cases against the Australian government. Unfortunately, this position effectively enables the tobacco industry to create further delays by attenuating resolution of these disputes.

While a cautious stance may initially have seemed prudent, the growing evidence base, increasing international adoption of standardised packaging and promising research findings from Australia, all suggest it is timely for the Government to revisit its initial position and accelerate the progress of this important legislation. If tobacco companies dictate the pace of New Zealand’s legislative agenda, we will see continuation of a marketing strategy that tempts young people into experimenting with smoking and sees 13 New Zealanders die every day from illnesses caused directly by smoking.

We call on the Government to recognise the encouraging evidence from Australia and growing adoption of standardised packaging by other countries, and re-assess their stance. There are now even more reasons to pass and implement standardised packaging legislation without delay.

The Australian government introduced standardised packaging primarily to protect young people from the devastating illnesses that reduce the length and quality of smokers’ lives. The legislation was designed to achieve this goal by reducing the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products, increasing the salience and impact of health warnings, and reducing the ability of tobacco product packaging to mislead consumers about the harms of smoking. Then Health Minister Nicola Roxon stated, “of course we’re targeting people who have not yet started, and that’s the key to this plain packaging announcement—to make
sure we make it less attractive for people to experiment with tobacco in the first place”.

Data from Australia, which implemented standardised packaging from 1 December 2012, support predictions from experimental and exploratory studies and show standardised packaging is achieving the legislation’s objectives, consistent with researchers’ and public health groups’ expectations.

Evidence of detailed trends among young people will inevitably take time to emerge, but it is encouraging that the recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) found, “Younger people are delaying the take up of smoking” and “the age at which 14-24-year-olds smoked their first full cigarette increased from 15.4 in 2010 to 15.9 in 2013”.

While age of initiation had been increasing for some time, the NDSHS evidence is consistent with predictions that standardised packaging would reduce the appeal of smoking. Studies conducted pre- and post-standardised packaging found smokers had significantly stronger cognitive, affective and aversive responses to on-pack warnings following standardised packaging’s implementation, while their perceptions of pack attractiveness and appeal all declined significantly. Their propensity to display packages in public settings, particularly those where children are present, also declined.

Analyses of smokers’ thoughts of quitting as standardised packaging was implemented found these increased.

Again, the mounting evidence from Australia corroborates predictions made using survey, qualitative and experimental data, and strengthens the case for urgent action to pass and implement standardised packaging legislation.

It is also encouraging that adult smoking prevalence post-standardised packaging has fallen to the lowest level yet recorded. The 2013 NDSHS reported 12.8% of Australians aged 14 years and over were daily smokers, a decline of 2.3% percentage points from 2010; furthermore, smokers have reduced the average number of cigarettes they smoke per week from 111 cigarettes in 2010 to 96 in 2013. These figures are also consistent with researchers’ predictions and are further supported by other government data. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed total consumption of tobacco and cigarettes, as measured by estimated expenditure on tobacco, fell from $3.508 billion in the last quarter of 2012 to $3.405 billion in the first quarter of 2014, the lowest expenditure ever recorded.

Commonwealth Treasury data showed similar results as tobacco clearances fell by 3.4% in 2013 relative to 2012.

The accumulating evidence contradicts dire predictions made by the tobacco industry and its allies that standardised packaging would result in adverse consequences, such as increased smuggling and illicit marketing of counterfeit cigarettes, or increased transaction times in stores. Industry claims have been comprehensively refuted by government agencies and peer-reviewed research.

Ahead of the legislation, the Australian tobacco industry and its allies claimed through lobbying, media, and even advertising, that they would be entitled to billions of dollars in compensation. When this claim was tested in the High Court, the industry not only lost comprehensively, but was required to pay the government’s costs. Furthermore, far from alienating smokers, support for standardised packaging among smokers almost doubled following the policy’s introduction.

Discrepancies between tobacco companies’ predictions and the actual effects we are now seeing should not be surprising, given the tobacco industry’s long-standing reliance on spurious arguments and questionable practices to oppose proportionate policy measures. Robust analyses from the UK recently exposed how the tobacco industry has misrepresented standardised packaging and suggest the government should treat any ‘evidence’ adduced by the industry with considerable scepticism.

Increasing adoption of standardised packaging by other countries suggests deferring progress on New Zealand legislation until international court cases have concluded is no longer a logical position for the government to hold. Deferring action risks leaving policy making captive to an industry that now has every incentive to delay these international legal proceedings for as long as possible.
We have known for decades how the tobacco industry has used packaging to position smoking as glamorous, sophisticated and rebellious, particularly following restrictions on traditional mass media advertising. The industry's arguments that standardised packaging would have no effect are as hollow as its legal actions are desperate, and the time has surely come for the Government to acknowledge the strong research evidence, display the same initiative shown by some of its strongest allies, and take firm, decisive action that sees standardised packaging implemented as soon as possible.

In summary, the Government has no need to fear standing alone or acting precipitously—it neither is nor would be. However, it should be mindful of the risk New Zealand now faces: being left behind as other countries respond to the research evidence and show resolute leadership in the face of corporate bullies. We urge the Government to act on the real-world data that is rapidly amassing, take a principled and evidence-based stand, and pass and implement the standardised packaging legislation as quickly as possible. Doing so will reassert New Zealand as a leader in tobacco control, demonstrate a commitment to ending the smoking epidemic, and foster realisation of New Zealand’s world-leading goal of becoming smokefree by 2025.

Competing interests:
Janet Hoek reports she has received funding for tobacco control research from the Health Research Council, Royal Society Marsden Fund, ASH NZ, NZ Ministry of Health, and the NZ Heart Foundation. Some of the studies funded examined plain packaging, but the findings reported in this viewpoint were not directly funded by any external grant. She is a member of the Australian Government’s Expert Advisory group on plain packaging and have given expert advice on this topic to the NZ Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Agency. Professor Daube reports he was Deputy Chair of the Australian Government’s National Preventative Health Taskforce and chaired the Tobacco Expert Committee that recommended plain packaging as part of a comprehensive approach.

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