

Why the tobacco industry fears plain packaging



Tobacco control advocate Simon Chapman explains how this public health reform will work

In past months, Australian news audiences have been exposed to some exotic, presumed-extinct species on their screens and radios. After more than 15 years, the tobacco industry dodo is back and walking among us, attempting to fly. Australia's pioneering plain packaging legislation has brought it out into public, in a desperate effort to prevent the fall of a domino that promises to cascade globally, ending the industry's centrepiece of tobacco promotion: the lure of the pack.

The University of California's Stan Glantz once remarked that those who lead the tobacco industry are like cockroaches: "They love the dark and they spread disease."¹ Ever since the magnesium glare unleashed by the public release of its internal documents via the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement in the United States, the industry has kept well out of public view, working behind the scenes to shore up its ebbing credibility. The court of public opinion told tobacco companies they were regarded as the most untrustworthy of all industries.² Media appearances had become progressively humiliating as their spin was rejected. But the truth serum contained in the millions of now-public pages of court-ordered internal documents sealed their public fate. The industry had known tobacco killed, but had lied about it for decades. Their marketing divisions had underlined the vital importance of recruiting youth, and their chemists had been busy working to enhance the addictiveness of nicotine.

Australia's historic plain cigarette packaging legislation is a weapons-grade public health policy that is causing apoplexy in the international industry. It is likely to have little effect on heavily dependent smokers, who tend to be brand-loyal and less image-conscious, but without branding, future generations will grow up never having seen category A carcinogens packaged in attractive packs. Today's 19-year-olds have never seen local tobacco advertising and youth smoking rates are at an all-time low. Plain packs will turbocharge this trend, making smoking history.

Tobacco is a dying market in nations like Australia, which leads the world in comprehensive tobacco control. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data released in July of this year show only 15.1% of Australians are now smoking daily³ — the lowest percentage ever recorded.

From the beginning of the 20th century, when machine-manufactured cigarettes were first marketed, the advertising

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and packaging industries did all they could to portray cigarettes as a means of signalling personal identity to the young as they took up smoking. A callow youth who wouldn't be seen dead with an Alpine felt assured by the promise of masculinity in pulling out a packet of Marlboros. Those not wanting the social opprobrium that can come with being showy had the iconic ordinariness of Winfield to clutch as their totem. Those wanting to affect retro stylishness have Peter Stuyvesant or Lucky Strike, and wannabes, any number of haute couture brands — designer carcinogens. But from next year, all cigarette packages will look the same, distinguished only by the brand name in standard typeface.

The industry's re-entry into policy debate has produced some high comedy. In advising government that plain packs will "not work", it sought a role as a wise public health authority, when of course its fiduciary duty to its shareholders demands that it support policies that maximise use. It has commissioned reports that purport to show that 15.9% (1 in 6) of cigarettes being smoked now are illicit, when the latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare national survey reports that a mere 1.5% of smokers use illegal tobacco more than half the time.³ Most of all though, its blank-cheque advertising campaigns, imploring the government to desist, say to anyone with half a brain that the industry knows plain packs will "kill their business", as the cover story of a tobacco trade magazine put it in 2008. That's precisely the plan.

Tobacco kills one in two of its long-term users. The tobacco industry's current undisguised panic shows that plain packs will hit them very hard. If she were to do nothing else, Minister for Health and Ageing Nicola Roxon has marked her tenure with this legislation, which has just been passed, unopposed, in the lower house of Parliament. It will stand in public health history as a major chapter of how governments put the health of the population before the corporate interests of a pariah industry. Just one disease caused by smoking — lung cancer — was rare before 1930. Over the next 50 years, it rose to become the world's leading cause of cancer death. In countries like Australia, it is now on the wane. Plain packaging will accelerate its eventual demise as a major cause of death.

Competing interests: I am a director of Action on Smoking and Health Australia and Emeritus Editor of *Tobacco Control*.

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- 1 Bark E. Big tobacco gets smoked. *Dallas Morning News* 1999; Oct 21. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1999-10-21/lifestyle/9910200505_1_tobacco-wars-tobacco-industry-williamson-tobacco-corp (accessed Aug 2011).
- 2 Durkin SJ, Germian D, Wakefield M. Adults' perceptions about whether tobacco companies tell the truth in relation to issues about smoking. *Tob Control* 2005; 14: 429-430.
- 3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report. Canberra: AIHW, 2011. (AIHW Cat. No. PHE 145; Drug Statistics Series No. 25.)