Health Warnings on Tobacco Products: Absolving the Profiteer, Punishing the Victim

The Ethics of Australian Legislation

Deborah G. Graham*

Department of Psychology, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Abstract

In recent years, health warnings on tobacco products have become compulsory through legislation introduced by the Australian government. This approach shows a lack of concern for tobacco consumers while allowing government to abdicate responsibility without jeopardising profit. The decision to warn people of inevitable addiction and disease (while protecting those who profit from such sales) fails to recognise previous research into adolescent attraction to deviance and the role of suggestion in cure and illness. The Australian government makes millions of dollars each year by taxing tobacco products—as long as these profits continue to be directed almost exclusively into consolidated revenue, smokers will remain victims of a system unconcerned with exploitation. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Successful anti-smoking strategies are evident in Australia. Tobacco smoking has become less socially acceptable and is now appraised more negatively than previously was the case [1]. Legislation relating to tobacco products in Australia has resulted in smoking bans on commercial aircraft, in Australian airports, and in government buildings. Advertising of tobacco products has also been banned in print and electronic media. Restaurants now either provide smoke-free areas, or have a smoke-free policy banning tobacco smoking. Many large shopping centres also ban the consumption of tobacco on their premises. These are important preventive measures, both in a legal and health context. The prevailing (and increasingly negative) attitude toward smoking has undoubtedly been influenced by these measures.

Prominent, explicit health warnings on tobacco products also may appear to be positive health strategies (see appendix A). It is dearly necessary that people fully understand the health consequences of smoking. This information should be provided and understood by the consumer. It should be recognised, however, that health messages high in fear and aimed at increasing a perception of personal vulnerability have a chequered history in adult intervention programmes [2]. For many youths, however, understanding the health consequences of smoking does even less to change the behaviour [3]. High fear messages aimed at decreasing smoking behaviour can potentially produce increases in smoking in adolescents attracted to deviance. Different variables to those identified in adult populations appear to

*Correspondence to: Department of Psychology, James Cook University, Cairns Campus, P.O. Box 6811, Cairns 4870, Australia.

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be operating to encourage and maintain smoking in adolescent males and females. Tough-mindedness, for example, has been linked to adolescent male cigarette smoking, while body image (staying slim by smoking) has been associated with adolescent female cigarette smoking [4]. Health warnings do nothing to moderate these influences. The very fact that smoking is now less socially desirable may encourage increased adolescent participation in the behaviour. Jessor [5] has forwarded five functions served by adolescent smoking. These functions include smoking cigarettes as a developmental transition marker; as an expression of opposition to adult authority; as an expression of solidarity with peers; as an affirmation of personal identity; and as a way of coping with anxiety, frustration and failure. Tobacco smoking can be made unattractive to adolescents if salient aspects are targeted—for adolescents, information about distant health problems is often met with the same response: ‘I’ll probably be hit by a bus first’ [6].

Stickers produced by a group of smokers to cover government health warnings illustrate why warnings must be well targeted (see appendix B). Many adolescents embraced these stickers—they are humorous, risqué and represent a further challenge to authority. The idea that ‘smoking is cool’ (and anti-establishment) was further reinforced by these stickers [7]. It is also necessary to note that the reasons why people smoke change over time. While adolescents may originally experiment with smoking for a variety of esteem-related reasons, addiction will in many cases ensure the maintenance of the behaviour. Telling somebody who is already addicted to a substance that it is dangerous to their health appears to be neither preventive nor health promoting.

There is, however, a more pressing concern. Given that the people most often exposed to the warnings on tobacco products are also the people who use the product most often, there is a danger of increasing the incidence of disease through suggestion, or the production of a placebo response. Placebos have been used as effective agents throughout recorded history. In 1964 Shapiro contended: ‘Placebos can be more powerful than, and reverse the action of, potent active drugs…. The incidence of placebo reactions approaches 100% in some studies. Placebos can have profound effects on organic illnesses, including incurable malignancies. Placebos can mimic the effects usually thought to be the exclusive property of active drugs’ [8].

These powerful effects should not be under-estimated. Unfortunately, the popular belief that placebo therapy is used to pacify the neurotically ill has undermined accurate perceptions of the power of the placebo (this view of the placebo is, of course, found mainly in western societies). Pharmaceutical companies ‘take advantage of the placebo phenomenon by packaging medications in shapes and colours that have been found to have maximum efficacy’ [9]. Thus, strong antibiotics, for example, are often coloured brightly, or with unusual colours, strengthening the consumer’s belief in the effectiveness of the medication. The efficacy of medical treatment is thus maximised through suggestion.

Placebo responses have been variously attributed to conditioning, expectancy, modulation of endogenous neurotransmitters, and endorphin release [9]. Placebo’s action need not, however, be limited to cure. Placebos can produce ‘toxic reactions and undesirable side effects… a strong belief system can hasten the demise of a person’ [9].

Government health warnings on tobacco products in Australia are striking for two reasons: first because of their size, and second, because of the amount of information provided regarding the damaging effects of smoking tobacco. The possible role of suggestion in disease reduction and exacerbation should at least be considered in this instance. Smoking-related diseases could be mediated by the continual pairing of tobacco with the suggestion of disease. That is, while smoking and disease are causally related through conventionally understood mechanisms, pairing of the suggestion of disease with smoking could result in a placebo effect that could act as an independent mediator of illness and disease. Unfortunately, such a