Look, see, quit: new images to shock smokers

Graphic images on cigarette packets, similar to those introduced in Australia last March, have been found in a recently-published international study to be the most effective way to get across to smokers the range and severity of the health risks they face.

The Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing, Christopher Pyne, said the study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, analysed data from 15,000 adult smokers in Australia, Canada, Britain and the US.

It found that larger and more vivid warnings, such as those introduced in Australia since the study was undertaken, were more likely to retain their impact over time than less prominent warnings.

The findings add to a growing body of literature that suggests graphic warnings are more effective than text warnings. In addition, the study highlighted the ‘novelty’ effect of health communications and the importance of periodically revising the warnings on cigarette packages to avoid ‘wear out’.

“As I announced in November last year, from today cigarette manufacturers must display the next set of seven graphic health warning images on their products.

“The new images show the links between smoking and lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, blindness, the effects of smoking on unborn babies, the addictiveness of smoking and the toxicity of tobacco smoke,” Mr Pyne said.

“Because tobacco is addictive, smokers need more than just words to stub out their last cigarette. They need the hard visual facts to motivate them to quit.

“Preliminary findings from an Australian Government survey also support this. These findings indicated that the new warnings have improved smokers’ knowledge of the health effects of smoking and raised their concerns about smoking. The health warnings are also helping people to stay ex-smokers and discouraging non-smokers from starting.

“These results are very heartening and reassure me that the Australian Government is succeeding in increasing knowledge about the health effects of smoking. This, in turn, has the potential to reduce the rate of smoking and to prevent people taking up smoking.
“Like the first set of health warnings, the next group of images inform Australians of the potentially-devastating health effects of smoking.”

Over the past 12 months, seven graphic colour picture warnings have replaced text-only health warnings on tobacco products. From 1 March 2007, the Australian Government requires the second set of pictorial warnings to be printed on Australian-manufactured and imported tobacco products. To keep the messages fresh, the two sets will continue to rotate every 12 months.

“The new packaging also makes it easier for smokers to act on their desire to quit, with the phone number and web address for the Quitline clearly printed on the cigarette packets,” Mr Pyne said.

Since the introduction of the graphic warnings in 2006, the number of calls to the Quitline doubled, compared with 2005 - from 80,000 calls to more then 165,000 calls - from people looking for help to give up their smoking habit.

Australia has been at the forefront of public education campaigns, with many national and international bodies requesting use of the images in quit-smoking campaigns, magazine articles, professional journals and at conferences.

“Many people may not realise quite how bad smoking is for you. Around 19,000 Australians die each year of smoking-related causes,” Mr Pyne said.

For more information on the warnings and the impact smoking tobacco has on a person’s health, see www.quitnow.info.au and select ‘health warnings’.

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