

Canada's world precedent setting health warnings directly on every individual cigarette

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Background and context

On May 31, 2023, Canada became the first country with a requirement for a health warning directly on every cigarette. This world-first measure, which has received extensive international attention, will reduce smoking and increase awareness of smoking's health effects. The measure will reach all smokers, reduce the appeal of cigarettes, complement package warnings, and prompt discussion. The cost of printing the warnings is entirely paid by tobacco companies. This measure may be even more significant in low-income countries where cigarettes are often sold individually without package warnings.

In Canada, the first actual cigarettes with the warnings (see photo) started to appear on store shelves in January 2024. The warnings are bilingual (English, French). For most cigarettes, the implementation deadline is April 30, 2024, at the manufacturer level and July 31, 2024, at the retail level, with some cigarettes having a later deadline.

Aim

This presentation will outline the successful Canadian advocacy experience to require warnings on individual cigarettes.

Strategy/tactics

The many strategies and tactics in the advocacy campaign included:

- advocating from 2004 for the measure;
- commissioning research (initially in 2006);
- compiling research done worldwide (now about 25 studies)
- obtaining amendments to national legislation to have regulatory authority for the measure
- preparing briefs and conducting meetings with government officials to provide the rationale
- citing guidelines under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control
- preparing a draft regulation
- supporting the measure in media statements
- responding to industry opposition and arguments, including that the warnings on cigarettes: would not work; may cause health risks from the ink; would cause contraband; infringed constitutional protection of freedom of expression.

Programme/Policy

Health warnings directly on every cigarette.

Process

Steps in the process included:

May 2018 – national legislation amended to authorize regulations; October 2018 – government general consultation for new tobacco labelling; 2022 – draft regulations published for consultation; 2023 – final regulations adopted

Outcomes

The national regulation adopted in 2023 followed a successful advocacy campaign and extensive work by Health Department officials. Australia is now preparing its own regulations. Other countries are expected to follow as well.

What was learned

Canada has adopted and implemented this pioneering measure, demonstrating feasibility for other countries. Tobacco industry opposition can be overcome.

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Conflicts of interest : **No**

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