

LETTERS

WARNINGS ON TOBACCO PACKETS

Is your MP concerned about public health?

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WHO has pledged to urge more countries to adopt large graphic health warnings on tobacco products¹ because countries vary greatly in the use of such warnings.²

Canada was the first country to implement health warnings on cigarette packages in 2001,³ long before the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which came into force in 2005. The convention called for health warnings on tobacco packaging to cover at least 30% (ideally 50% or more) of display areas.

France was only the 39th country to enforce the recommendation about pictures on packages (in 2011) because the government allowed the industry an unbelievable two years for discussions plus a one year delay for the sale of stock. In addition, the required size of the picture is only 30% of the front and 40% of the back.

In March 2010 Uruguay became the first country to require 80% of the package to be given up to health warnings. The effectiveness of such warnings in stopping the deadly tobacco pandemic is demonstrated by the fact that the giant Philip Morris International (market capital of \$107bn; £65.5bn; €75bn) has filed a complaint with the World Bank's International Centre

for Settlement of Investment Disputes against the small but courageous Uruguay (gross domestic product of \$44bn).⁴

Health warnings on cigarette packs are a powerful tool for tobacco control. But their size may turn out to be the result of a complex balance between MPs' concerns about public health and the influence of the tobacco lobby.⁵

Competing interests: AB, a senior tenured consultant in public health, was sacked by the French Department of Health against the advice of the National Statutory Committee. GD is being sued for libel by the French Tobacconists Union (*Tobacco Control Blog* 8 November 2010 <http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2010/11/08/>).

- 1 Zarocostas J. WHO urges more countries to adopt large graphic health warnings on tobacco products. *BMJ* 2011;343:d4237. (7 July.)
- 2 Tobacco Labelling Resource Centre. <http://www.tobaccolabels.ca>.
- 3 White C. Canada plans stronger health warnings on cigarette packs. *BMJ* 2000;320:140.
- 4 Wilson D. Cigarette giants in global fight on tighter rules. *New York Times* 2010 November 13. www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/business/global/14smoke.html.
- 5 Watson R. MEPs back tougher health warnings on cigarette packets. *BMJ* 2001;322:7.

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