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Letter to the Editor

Responses to increasing cigarette prices in France: How did the tobacco lobby react?

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Peretti-Watel and colleagues' survey of French smokers' reactions to increasing cigarette prices deserves comments [1].

Among 2000 respondents in 2008, 668 reported that they had been cigarette-smokers in 2003. Between 2003 and 2008, 110 (16%) out of these 668 had quit and 54% stated that the price of cigarettes had been one of the main reasons for quitting. The 110 quitters were replaced in part by 63 new smokers. These figures may underestimate the impact of price increases on smoking cessation and on reducing the level of initiation. Indeed, the 2003–2008 period was marked by two different parts, the increase in price was very short lived, the last one being in January 2004.

The first part began at the autumn of 2002 with an increase in taxes raising cigarettes prices by 12.5%. Then the first Cancer Plan (March 2003), imposed three more increases in a year (January 2003, October 2003 and January 2004) adding up to a 39% increase. This sharply decreased cigarette sales down to 54.9 billion of cigarettes in 2004 from 83.5 in 2001, after several years of plateau (83.0 in 1997) [2].

The relative price of cigarettes (i.e. the nominal price divided by the Consumer Price Index, year 1970 being 100 for reference) increased from 152 in 2001 to 221 in 2004 but then after leveled off, being 220 in 2008 as Jean Pierre Raffarin, Prime minister, closed out this first part by a moratorium on tobacco taxes which lasts nowadays [2]. The tobacco lobby must have been quite persuasive.

A recent national survey in March 2011 showed an increase in prevalence of daily smoking among 17 year olds from 28.9% in 2008 to 31.5% in 2011 [3]. Indeed, President Sarkozy has continued to protect the tobacco industry's interests. His budget Minister, François Baroin, even stated that he was favorably considering the requests of the tobacco industry for "moderate and reasonable" price

increases, that would not jeopardize the level of activity of the tobaccoists – i.e. that would have no public health impact [4].

Price policy is only one of the many evidence based measures described by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control for promoting of cessation and reducing initiation. Again, France lags behind others countries. E.g. France was only the 39th country in the world to enforce warning pictures in 2011 and it only required a picture size of 40% on the backside, far from the 80% in Uruguay or 75% in Canada and from the plain packaging in Australia for the end of 2012 [5].

Durable efforts and comprehensive programs are mandatory. Protecting public health policies from the tobacco industry's influence is a major challenge. The lack of effective tobacco control policy costs tens of thousands of lives but is highly profitable to the tobacco industry.

Conflict of interests

Dr Braillon, a senior tenured consultant was sacked from Pr Dubois' unit by the French Department of Health against the advice of the National Statutory Committee, while Pr Dubois was being sued for libel by the French Tobaccoists Union. (Abuse of libel laws and a sacking: The gagging of public health experts in France. Tobacco control 8 November 2010. <http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2010/11/08/>.)

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Alain Braillon*
27 rue Voiture, 80000 Amiens, France

Gérard Dubois
Public Health, Amiens University Hospital,
France

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: braillon.alain@gmail.com
(A. Braillon)

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