

Misleading Cigarette Packaging in 14 Countries

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Background

- When descriptors “mild”, “light”, and “low tar” are used on cigarettes to convey less harm, smokers believe they are less risky and less addictive than “full flavor” cigarettes
- Cigarettes labeled “light” and “low tar” are not associated with decreased health risk
- More than 40 countries prohibit misleading descriptors on packs, however other strategies (colors, symbols, alternative descriptors) are also used to convey less harm
- FCTC calls for packaging and labeling that does not create a false impression that a product is less harmful than other tobacco products

Methods

- Cigarette packs systematically purchased in 14 low- and middle- income countries in 2013: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, and Viet Nam
- Three cities in each country selected based on diversity; in each city, cigarette packs purchased from up to 12 retailers selected from low, middle, and high socioeconomic neighborhoods
- Packs displaying respective country’s health warning label coded for explicitly prohibited misleading descriptors in 7 countries where applicable (n=990); all packs (n=3,240) from 14 countries coded for select misleading descriptors and symbols

Results

Compliance with country regulations

- Compliance with prohibited misleading descriptors on cigarette packs was high (87-100%) in the seven countries that ban specific misleading descriptors: Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Mexico, Thailand, and Ukraine
- 13% (n=15) of packs from Brazil displayed misleading descriptor “class(es)”
- 3% (n=9) of packs from China displayed misleading descriptors “light” (n=1) and “mild” (n=8)

Presence of misleading descriptors and symbols

- 348 packs (10.8%) displayed at least one of the following misleading descriptors:
 - light/lights (142 packs from 13 countries)
 - mild or low (118 packs from 10 countries)
 - soft, smooth, or mellow (126 packs from 12 countries)



- 39 packs displayed dots potentially indicating the strength of the cigarette



- 166 packs displayed numbers potentially indicating the strength of the cigarette



Conclusions

- Compliance with regulations was high, however less harm is still communicated on packs
- Circumventing current regulations may result in temporary or no reductions in misbeliefs about products marketed as less harmful
- Findings support call for prohibition of misleading descriptors and implementation of plain packaging
- Since data collection, the following countries have implemented restrictions on misleading descriptors: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, and Viet Nam