Plain packaging planned for cigarettes

MOH wants standardised packs in drab colour with logos, brand images dropped

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

The Ministry of Health (MOH) plans to change the law so that by 2020, no cigarette packs sold here will be allowed to carry logos, brand images or any promotional information. Instead, they will all be sold in packs of a drab, dark brown colour. But warnings may carry brighter colours.

The ministry also wants the gory picture on the pack showing the ill effects of smoking, such as blindness and gum disease, to cover at least 75 per cent of the pack—up from 50 per cent now.

This is its latest salvo to curb smoking here, following bans on tobacco advertisements, point-of-sale displays, a high tax and no-smoking zones.

Explaining the move, MOH said over 2,000 people in Singapore die prematurely from smoking-related diseases every year. Smoking also, conservatively, costs the country $600 million a year in direct health-care costs and lost productivity.

Within minutes of the announcement, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organisation, sent Singapore his congratulations on the decision, which affirms its status as a global leader on tobacco control and protection of health.

Singapore’s fight against smoking started in the 1970s, when 23 per cent of the population smoked. This figure fell to between 12 per cent and 14 per cent, and has stayed in that range since 2004 despite the Government’s best efforts to lower it.

In a media statement yesterday, MOH said: “Of particular concern, there remains a sizeable proportion of adult men (more than one in five) who smoke daily.”

So, more needs to be done, it said. Following three rounds of public consultations and evaluation of local and international research on smoking cessation, MOH decided the standard packaging would:

• Reduce the attractiveness of tobacco products;
• Remove tobacco packaging as a form of advertising and promotion;
• Reduce misleading information on harmful effects of smoking, such as relative harmful effects between tobacco products;
• Make the warning on the package more noticeable; and
• Provide better information on the risk of tobacco use.

The proposal will apply to all tobacco products sold here, including cigars, beedees and roll-your-own tobacco products.

MOH will propose amendments to the Tobacco (Control of Advertisements and Sales) Act early next year. If enacted, the changes will go into force from 2020.

The ministry said sufficient notice will be given to the tobacco industry about the finalised specifications of the standard package.

The proposals include: the use of a standardised design of cigarette packs, a dark brown colour and a logo indicating the harmful effects of smoking. This is similar to the package design adopted in Australia since 2012.

The packs cannot carry logos, seals or features that change after sale, such as those triggered by heat or visible under fluorescent light. Even the way the packs are opened will be standardised.

Experts believes the measure was worth a try. Professor Chia Kee Seng of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said: “If it works, it’s a huge step forward.”

So, the cost of smoking does not fall just on the individual who smokes, but also on his employer and the nation. Second-hand smoke could also affect family and friends.

Having said that, how effective will the latest proposal to allow only plain standardised packaging for tobacco products be?

In explaining its decision, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said evidence has shown that “standardised packaging reduced the appeal of the packaging and the product”. It concluded that reducing the overall product appeal should lead to lower smoking rates.

Part of this belief comes from “the industry’s internal documents” that there is a link between the attractiveness of the packaging and the appeal of the product.

The proposed standardised packaging for tobacco products. Evidence shows such packaging reduces the product’s appeal, said MOH. PHOTO: MOH.

Commentary
Tackling smoking is a package deal that must include better enforcement

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Senior Health Correspondent

Anything that can reduce smoking is good. In fact, there is no longer any debate on the ill effects of smoking, as they have been too well established.

In Singapore alone, smoking is responsible for more than 2,000 premature deaths a year. Smoking-related illnesses cost the country $600 million annually in terms of healthcare treatments and the loss of productivity in working-age adults.

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