Plan to sell smokes in plain packaging

Packets to feature only brand names and larger health warnings

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By 2020, all tobacco products sold here will have the same plain packaging, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has proposed.

No logos, colours, brand images and promotional information will be allowed, and the graphic health warnings will have to cover at least three-quarters of the package, up from half now.

This is the latest in a slew of recent measures aimed at reducing Singapore's smoking prevalence rate, which has hovered around 12 per cent to 14 per cent over the last decade.

Measures to reduce smoking have included banning shops from displaying tobacco products, raising tobacco taxes, expanding non-smoking areas, and raising the legal age to 21 over the next three years.

MOH said it will propose amendments to current laws early next year. If enacted, the new measure will come into force in 2020.

The ministry noted that more than 2,000 Singaporeans die prematurely from smoking-related diseases every year, and smoking conservatively costs the country at least $600 million annually in direct healthcare costs and lost productivity.

"Tobacco use is a major cause of ill health and death in Singapore... More needs to be done to achieve sustained declines in the overall smoking rates and, in particular, male smoking rate," it said in a press statement.

More than one in five men here smoke daily, higher than the rates in 13 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

Singapore will join seven countries that have implemented similar laws, including France, Britain and Australia, the first country to do so in 2012.

MOH said it engaged in extensive reviews and evaluations of local and international studies, research and evidence before deciding on the packaging law, which has been in the works since 2010.

It also conducted three public consultations and said it has carefully considered the possible costs and impact to the tobacco and related industries.

PROPOSAL

While not final, the proposed specifications include having the plain packaging in a standard dark brown colour, which Australia uses.

Brand and product names can be shown but must use a standard colour, font and be in a standard location. The packages cannot use noises, scents or features that might change after sale, such as those activated by heat or appear under fluorescent light.

MOH said the industry will be given sufficient notice of the specifications, which will apply to products including cigarettes, cigars, beedies and loose-leaf tobacco.

There will be a transition period to allow old stock to be cleared and ease burden of implementation.

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Standardised tobacco packaging could curb smoking

Singapore's decision to introduce standardised tobacco packaging could be an effective way to curb smoking here if results in Australia are anything to go by, say experts.

Australia was the first country to introduce plain packaging in 2012, and a government review in 2016 found that it had contributed directly to a 0.55 per cent decline in the smoking rate three years later.

Dr Lambert Low, a consultant with the National Addictions Management Service at the Institute of Mental Health, told The New Paper yesterday: "I believe that if we extrapolate their results to Singapore, we will be able to achieve similar kinds of results."

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said strict laws on sales and advertisements mean the product packaging itself is "one of the last frontiers" for tobacco firms to market themselves.

Limiting brand imagery and increasing graphic warnings have been shown to reduce the appeal and further normalise the image of smoking, he said.

"In the past, smoking has been sexed up or made a lot more attractive because there is this view that it looks macho."

"But with standardised packaging, that message to the young, as well as to existing smokers, is that it is something that they ought to be heavily discouraged from," he added.

Noting that standardised packaging does not work in isolation, Prof Teo said: "It is useful to think about this in the context of complementing existing tobacco control measures... All of this has to work jointly to address the issue of reducing smoking prevalence."

Dr Low said some of his patients wrongly believed that changing brands or products could reduce the harm from smoking.

Standardised packaging can help to eradicate these unfounded beliefs and also help to change the social norms associated with smoking.

He said: "Smoking even one cigarette stick a day is actually quite harmful. So with standardised packaging, we want to dispel the notion that there is such a thing as a safe cigarette, that there is such a thing as a better brand of cigarettes." - KOK YUFENG