

Plain packaging of tobacco products never intended as 'silver bullet'

It complements anti-smoking measures, such as the ban on point-of-sale display

Teo Yik Ying

For The Straits Times

The recent proposal to introduce standardised tobacco packaging has elicited strong responses from diverse sectors.

Many have lauded the move, including Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), who tweeted a congratulatory message to Singapore. However, some have derided the move as superficial and naive, and one which is unlikely to change the behaviour of smokers.

How is it that the same announcement that is endorsed by Dr Ghebreyesus as "showing public health leadership" has drawn scathing comments on social media as a superficial or a "wayang" act?

Smoking is clearly an extremely emotive issue.

To smokers, tobacco control measures are perceived as a violation of their personal liberties, especially with recent moves to limit the number of public spaces where smoking is allowed. However, non-smokers similarly say that smokers contravene their right to smoke-free air and, thus, constantly press for stronger measures to curb the negative impact of second- and third-hand smoke.

The new regulation stipulates nondescript tobacco packaging in dull-coloured packets, with severely restricted brand-labelling in standardised font and size, and the considerable enhancement of mandatory graphic health warnings covering at least three-quarters of the pack's surface, instead of the current mandated 50 per cent.

Critics of the new regulation either felt the current measures were ineffective in deterring smokers, given that graphic warnings have existed since 2003, or were not decisive enough as an outright ban on tobacco products.

Proponents of alternative tobacco products, too, jumped on the bandwagon and revised recommendations or "radical approaches" to allow alternative nicotine delivery systems, such as e-cigarettes.

For an issue as polarised as this, it helps to get down to the facts.

The effectiveness of limiting brand imagery has been systematically evaluated both locally and internationally, and the evidence has been consistent

and crystal clear – plain packaging with enlarged graphic health warnings significantly reduces the appeal of the tobacco product.

The battle against smoking is not simply in encouraging and supporting smokers to kick the habit, but also in ensuring that impressionable adolescents and young adults do not start. Any weapon in the arsenal that reduces the likelihood or appeal of smoking ought to be considered seriously, since this discourages experimentation and initiation.

Australia was the first country to implement plain packaging in 2012 and it has seen a consistent reduction in smoking prevalence from 18 per cent in 2010 to 14 per cent in 2016.

France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand and Norway have since implemented the same policy.

In fact, WHO recommended this policy on plain packaging and enlarged graphic health warnings last year as a cost-effective measure against preventable disease and death as a result of tobacco use. Bear in mind, the diseases and deaths caused by smoking are entirely avoidable.

It must, however, be emphasised that plain packaging is certainly no "silver bullet" to magically

bring down smoking prevalence in Singapore. It is intended to complement and enhance existing tobacco control measures.

Smoking prevalence here has declined from 14 per cent to 12 per cent between 2010 and 2017, but it is important to remember that the prevalence actually rose between 2004 and 2010.

It is thus not a given that smoking rates will continue to decline, and we should continue to introduce calibrated and evidence-based measures to sustain the decline.

The Ministry of Health has introduced a point-of-sale display ban, and raised the legal smoking age from 18 to 21. Standardised packaging complements these measures to further denormalise the image of smoking and to discourage initiation.

Some Singaporeans have asked for e-cigarettes to be permitted but, in fact, the evidence on their long-term effect is inconclusive.

Longitudinal studies of smokers have shown no conclusive evidence that e-cigarettes and other forms of electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS) were effective at helping smokers kick the habit at the population level.

E-cigarettes or alternative nicotine delivery technologies may

even harm society. There are disturbing reports on what have been termed "gateway effects", for adolescents and young adults who started on ENDS and subsequently moved on to regular cigarettes.

Is this truly the answer we are looking for in tackling the smoking problem, when the evidence on ENDS as a smoking cessation aid is fuzzy and there is clear evidence that it inducts young people into the smoking habit?

Finally, is an outright ban on all tobacco products something Singapore should implement? After all, an oft-cited example is Singapore's ban on chewing gum. If the country had the gumption to ban chewing gum, why not apply it to tobacco products too?

Surprising as it may sound, an outright ban on smoking could ironically end up as an "irresponsible" policy decision.

Smoking is highly addictive, and the addiction to nicotine cannot be trivialised. A common perspective shared by adult smokers is one of regret and that, if given the opportunity to choose again, they would not have started smoking.

If this is the prevalent view among smokers, the fact that they continue with the habit indicates, in part, the challenge in breaking the cycle of nicotine

dependency. So an outright ban does not respect the difficulties a smoker faces.

Quitting the smoking habit is an arduous journey and encouragement needs to come from multiple fronts – at home and the workplace, and in the community, especially during periods of nicotine withdrawal and temptation from triggers.

Minimising environmental triggers, such as eliminating visual cues at tobacco retailers and restricting public spaces for smoking, are important in supporting the journey to quit smoking.

We need to put the brakes on smoking initiation, while concurrently help smokers to quit the habit. This is easier said than done.

Plain packaging is not the radical approach that will provide the singular answer to tackle smoking, but it will work alongside existing measures to drive down smoking prevalence.

stopin@spsh.com.sg

• Professor Teo Yik Ying is dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore.

