

Over 78,500 children have started smoking since UK Government's consultation on standardised tobacco packaging ended

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This Valentine's day the Smokefree Action Coalition ^[1] is calling on the Government to take action and "have a heart" by committing to legislation to make all tobacco packaging standard. Today is the tenth anniversary of the implementation of the ban on tobacco advertising and the seventh anniversary of the Commons vote for smokefree legislation. Valentine's Day is therefore an ideal date for the Government to make its decision known.

The clock is ticking. Since the consultation on the legislation ended just over six months ago, it is estimated that 78,500 children will have started smoking in the UK, a number which grows by 430 every day. Now the Smokefree Action Coalition, an alliance of over 190 health organisations including the BMA, medical royal colleges, public health bodies, academic institutions and health charities, is calling on the Government to publish the results of its consultation and announce that it will go ahead with legislation.

Currently in the UK, there are no restrictions on the way tobacco multinationals are allowed to promote their brands through packaging. The packs are now the principal form of tobacco promotion and are designed to attract existing and potential consumers with colourful and eye-catching imagery.

Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive of health charity ASH said:

"The evidence is clear that heavily branded, brightly coloured packs are attractive to children. It's been six months since the consultation closed and the clock is ticking. Every day hundreds more children take up smoking - children who need protecting from tobacco industry marketing. The government must commit now to legislation to put all tobacco products in standard packs."

Sir Richard Thompson, President of the Royal College of Physicians, said:

"As a young doctor I was depressed to see so many patients in their 50s and 60s suffering because they had started smoking as children. Back then there was very little we could do, but now we have the opportunity to help protect our children by implementing standardised packaging."

Dr Harpal Kumar, Cancer Research UK's Chief Executive, said:

"Around 430 children start smoking in the UK every day. With one in four cancer deaths caused by smoking, this is far too many children who are pulled into the lethal addiction. More than 80,000 Cancer Research UK supporters were among the 200,000 people calling on the Government to introduce plain, standardised cigarette packs. Our supporters run marathons and climb mountains to bring forward the day when we beat cancer. When the Government has a practical way to help prevent cancer, we urge it to act."

Louise Morris, 36, a mother and former smoker from Newcastle who was influenced by cigarette packaging as a child, also wants the Government to act. She said:

"I started smoking with a group of friends when I was 13 years old. We all thought it was really fashionable to smoke the brand of cigarettes that looked the most attractive and I remember smoking cigarettes in a shiny gold packet because it made us feel like we were smoking a glamorous brand of cigarettes that looked more expensive compared to everyone else's cigarettes."

There is no evidence that standardised packaging will bolster the illegal tobacco trade as some tobacco multinationals suggest.^[2] Branded tobacco packaging is no obstacle to counterfeiters and standardised packs

would carry the same covert markings currently used to distinguish legal from illicit tobacco products. Legislation which ensures tobacco packaging is free from attractive designs will, above all else, help to discourage children from starting to smoke. ^[3]

Smoking is a childhood addiction, not an adult choice. ^[4] More than 150,000 children start smoking each year in the UK. ^[5] Half of all lifelong smokers will die from their addiction, amounting to over 100,000 people last year in the UK. ^[6]

Putting tobacco products in standardised packs is a popular measure. Opinion research shows that 62% of the public support the plain, standardised packaging of tobacco products, with more smokers supporting than opposing the measure. ^[7] Over 200,000 people have expressed their support for the introduction of plain, standardised packaging of tobacco products in the UK. Internationally, standardised packaging is already in place in Australia which became the first country to implement such legislation in December 2012. It's time for the UK to follow suit.

Notes and links

[1] The Smokefree Action Coalition is an alliance of over 190 health organisations including medical royal colleges, the BMA, the Trading Standards Institute, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Faculty of Public Health, the Association of Directors of Public Health and ASH. All support the introduction of standard packs.

[2] Smuggling the tobacco industry and plain packs. A report by Luk Joossens for Cancer Research UK.

[3] As a report by the Public Health Research Consortium showed, tobacco packaging is attractive and misleading, especially to children. See evidence summarised in the PHRC report http://phrc.lshtm.ac.uk/project_2011-2016_006.html

[4] Two thirds of smokers become addicted before the age of 18 and 39% under 16 see data from the General Lifestyle survey <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ghs/general-lifestyle-survey/2010/index.html>

[5] Estimate based on figures taken by CRUK from Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England (2000 to 2010).

[6] Data from national sources from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

[7] A poll by YouGov for ASH found that overall 62% of adults in England supported this while just 11% opposed the measure. Even among smokers for every 5 who oppose there are 6 who support. Total sample size was 10,000 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken from 27th February to 16th March 2012. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults (aged 18+) in England.