

Protect our children: standardise tobacco packaging now

Standardised, or plain, packaging of tobacco products is crucial for protecting our children and young people from the slick marketing of the tobacco industry. Unfortunately, despite the support of the Minister of Health and the Associate Minister of Health, the Standardised packaging Bill is stalled in Parliament awaiting its second reading. Delays in implementing standardised packaging are part of a wider malaise undermining the leadership in tobacco control New Zealand once showed. These delays bring into question New Zealand's commitment to protecting the next generation from the scourge of tobacco addiction.

In 2010, the Māori Affairs Select Committee's inquiry into the tobacco industry proposed a goal of a smoke-free Aotearoa by 2025. The goal was endorsed in the Government's response, which set out its aim of 'reducing smoking prevalence and tobacco availability to minimal levels' by 2025. The Smoke-free Aotearoa 2025 goal established New Zealand as a global pioneer, a country where the next generation of children and young adults would no longer risk addiction to a deadly product that kills over half of its long term users.

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the Māori Affairs Select Committee's report. Unfortunately, trends in smoking prevalence show that New Zealand is not on track to achieve the 2025 goal and that for Māori and Pacific people it will be missed by a wide margin. For some time, concerned health professionals, health NGOs, researchers, and community leaders have urged the Government to develop a clear, evidence-based strategy to achieve the Smoke-free goal. However, these calls to action have fallen on deaf ears.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Health's recent progress report to the Māori Affairs Select Committee revealed that the Government had failed to deliver promised actions in respect of several key recommendations. The most glaring example is the lack of progress in implementing standardised packaging.

Australia was the first country to implement standardised packaging on December 1 2012. In February 2013, the NZ Government announced its intention to follow suit. Minister Turia commented : "I am delighted that New Zealand is on track to be the second country in the world to legislate for plain packaging. This is another major step on the pathway to becoming a Smoke-free nation by 2025."

True to its word the Government introduced the Smoke-free Environments (Tobacco Plain Packaging) Amendment Bill, which completed its first reading in February 2014 (passing by 118 votes to 1). The Bill returned largely unchanged from the Health Select Committee in August 2014 to await its second reading.

We are still waiting.

The New Zealand Government has stated that it is waiting for the outcomes of two pending cases against the Australian Government. Most legal commentators are confident that the cases, orchestrated by the tobacco industry and based on deeply flawed arguments, will be thrown out. However, the timeline for their resolution is unclear. Further, having seen that these cases 'chill' action by Governments, the tobacco industry has no reason to resolve these disputes and every incentive to prolong their conclusion.

Other countries have been undeterred by these legal machinations. They have shown their commitment to safeguarding the health of future generations by proceeding rapidly. Ireland, not New Zealand, became the second country to pass plain packaging legislation in March this year. The UK followed shortly after, and Norway and France are poised to follow suit. Discussions are progressing in Finland, South Africa, Singapore, Hungary, Turkey, Panama and even Burkina Faso.

Meanwhile, the evidence continues to accumulate that plain packaging (together with complementary measures such as increases in tobacco taxation) has helped reduce smoking prevalence, now at its lowest level ever in Australia (around 13% in 2013). Recent Treasury data show that tobacco volumes in the Australian market based on Customs and Excise clearances fell by around 11% in the two years after standardised packaging was introduced.

As New Zealand was the first country to adopt a smoke-free goal, it should be in the vanguard of countries introducing key measures like plain packaging to protect young people from becoming addicted to tobacco products. Unfortunately, the lack of progress on developing a credible strategy for achieving the Smoke-free 2025 goal, the failure to fulfil promised actions in response to the Māori Affairs Select Committee recommendations, and especially, the continuing failure to proceed rapidly with plain packaging legislation, demonstrates that this is not the case.

The Smoke-free 2025 goal will have huge and lasting benefits for the health of current and future generations of New Zealanders. Strong and determined political leadership from the Prime Minister and Cabinet, including developing a clear strategy to prevent children starting and strong support for smokers to quit, will see the world-leading goal realised. An important first step is for the Government to stand up to the tobacco industry and pass the plain packaging legislation without further delay.

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