The New Image of Tobacco Smoking

By Mike Fillon

The old adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words” seems to have been on the minds of U.S. health officials, who mandated graphic warning labels on all cigarette packs sold in the U.S. after September 22, 2012.

In 1966, the U.S. became the first country to mandate warning labels on cigarettes. Since that first warning, “Caution: Cigarette Smoking May be Hazardous to Your Health,” many other countries began their own bold initiatives, leapfrogging the U.S. with graphic antismoking warnings on packs sold in their countries. (See sidebar.)

The new labels, which are the first change in messaging about U.S. tobacco dangers in nearly a quarter-century, will include graphic images and warning text messages covering the upper half of both the front and back of cigarette packs. They will replace the small, text-only messages that (because their location was left up to the tobacco companies) were typically tucked away in small type on the sides of the packs.

Supply and Demand
The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which Congress approved and President Obama signed into law on June 22, 2009, gives the U.S. Food and Drug Administration the authority to regulate the manufacture, distribution, advertisement, and promotion of tobacco products. Also, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which Obama signed on March 23, 2010, created a new Prevention and Public Health Fund that allows the Department of Health
and Human Services and the FDA “to expand and sustain prevention, wellness, and public health programs to improve the health of the nation and help restrain health care costs.”

In November 2009, Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius named Assistant Secretary for Health, Howard K. Koh, M.D., as chair of the working group that would develop a strategic action plan for tobacco control. The new cigarette labels, along with establishing and enforcing advertising and promotion restrictions, are key components of the government’s newly minted powers to control and curb tobacco use in the U.S.

Koh’s group has developed a strategic action plan around four of the government’s 10-year initiative “Healthy People 2020” tobacco control objectives:

- Reduce tobacco use by adults and adolescents.
- Reduce the initiation of tobacco use among children, adolescents, and young adults.
- Increase successful cessation attempts by smokers.
- Reduce the proportion of nonsmokers exposed to secondhand smoke.

The nine images that the FDA selected were pared down from an original group of 36. The FDA made its decisions after analyzing results from pertinent studies and sifting through more than 1,700 responses from consumers, health professionals and academics, public health advocacy groups and health agencies, medical organizations, retailers, and the tobacco industry.

The new images include pictures and drawings showing rotting teeth and gums, diseased lungs, and a tracheotomy hole, among others. They will be paired with text messages in English warning against the consequences of smoking, including “cigarettes cause cancer” and “smoking can kill you.”

One key aim of the graphic warnings is to persuade low-income groups and people with low literacy rates to quit. “We want each of the 15 billion packs of cigarettes sold in the U.S. to become mini-billboards to convince people not to smoke,” said Koh. “We want to demoralize and de glamorize the use of tobacco products.”

In addition to cigarette packs, the images and text must appear on cartons and must occupy at least 20% of the upper portion of each cigarette advertisement. Each warning will also include a smoking-cessation phone number, 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

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“Think the labels came up with are pretty good,” said Stanton Glantz, Ph.D., professor in the department of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. “Not dazzling, but it’s a good step forward.” Glantz, who is also director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education and co-leader of the Tobacco Control Program at UCSF, says there should be at least two or three different pictures for each verbal warning to reach a broader range of smokers. “The picture that would impact a pregnant woman or a parent is not necessarily going to impress the hipster segment.”

Glantz does think the addition of the quit line number alongside the images was a good decision because it could spur smokers to call when the notion of quitting is fresh in their minds. Glantz has written extensively about issues surrounding tobacco control, including the portrayal of smoking in the media.

Smoking in the U.S.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that cigarette smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke kill 443,000 people in the U.S. every year, and smoking costs the U.S. nearly $100 billion in medical costs and a similar amount in lost productivity each year.

Although adult smoking rates in the U.S. have been halved since the landmark 1964 Surgeon General’s report on the health effects of cigarette smoking (a decrease from 42.4% in 1965 to 20.6% in 2008), the decline in smoking rates has stalled, with virtually no change since 2004. Now it is nearly two times higher than the national goal set by Healthy People, which aimed to reduce adult prevalence to less than 12%.

The issue seems to be nailing people before they try smoking. According to The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking-Attributable Disease: A Report of the Surgeon General, one-third of people who have ever tried smoking become daily smokers. The solution is simple, said David Hammond, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of health studies and gerontology at the University of Waterloo in Canada. “You don’t have to quit if you never start.”

Hammond cowrote a study that found nearly 90% of 8,000 adult smokers in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia said they regretted starting to smoke. The study, in the December 2004 issue of Nicotine and Tobacco Research, also found that the smokers were addicted and that despite failed attempts in the past, they wanted to quit.

Get ‘Em When They’re Young

One of the main goals of the new pictures is to persuade young people not to start using tobacco. Hammond said between 80% and 85% of regular smokers started before age 18. And according to the November 2010 Health and Human Services study Ending the Tobacco Epidemic: A Tobacco Control Strategic Action Plan for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, every day, nearly 4,000 young people younger than 18 years try their first cigarette, and approximately 1,000 become daily smokers. The CDC estimates that unless this trend ends, 6 million of today’s youth will eventually die prematurely from smoking.

Studies show that tobacco marketing has special appeal for children and adolescents. According to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission’s Cigarette Report for 2006, U.S. cigarette manufacturers spent approximately $12.5 billion—or more than $34 million every day—to “attract new users, retain current users, increase consumption, and generate favorable attitudes toward smoking and tobacco use.” Although the tobacco industry denies it, they have always directed much of their marketing at young people.
“While I think the new illustrations are good overall, young people are going to continue to get mixed messages,” said Brian A. Primack, M.D., of the Division of General Internal Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. “Young people are going to get more of the pro–substance use messages because of how adept the tobacco companies are at strategically placing those messages and how common they already are in our society.” Primack has published studies on tobacco use in movies and popular music. One found that the average teenager is exposed to around 80 substance-use messages per day in popular music alone. “So yes, they’re going to get these new messages, but they could be dwarfed by these other types of messages,” he said.

According to Robert T. Croyle, Ph.D., director of the Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences at the National Cancer Institute, youth-targeted mass media countermarketing campaigns work. Croyle pointed to a study that appeared in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 2009 about the effectiveness of the National Truth campaign by the American Legacy Foundation, which estimated that approximately 450,000 fewer adolescents started smoking in the U.S. between 2000 and 2002. The study found that the campaign covered its cost and estimated that the endeavor saved just under $1.9 billion in medical costs over the lifetimes of youth who did not become smokers.

Health officials also recommend raising the retail price of tobacco products through excise tax increases. Research shows that for every
10% increase in the price of tobacco products, consumption falls by approximately 4% overall, with a greater reduction among youth.

**Only Time Will Tell**

Will these new images work? Will they help smokers quit and deter young people from starting to smoke? Glantz said part of their success will depend on the FDA keeping the messages fresh. The old text messages may initially have affected smoking rates, but they went unchanged for so long that people no longer noticed them, Glantz added. “Like all advertising, old, familiar messages do wear out. If they remain unchanged for 5 or 10 years, they’ll stop working.”

Koh said that is exactly what the FDA plans to do. He and other health officials are confident that the new and future pictures, along with other antismoking initiatives, will greatly curtail smoking.

For a nationwide effort to cut tobacco use to succeed, implementation and coordination with state and local initiatives are also necessary, said Croyle. In Massachusetts, for example, a comprehensive tobacco control program reduced statewide consumption by 48% between 1993 and 2003, before the program lost nearly all funding. Likewise, Maine, New York, and Washington have seen 45%–60% reductions in youth smoking rates with sustained comprehensive statewide programs. Croyle said that although there have been pockets of success—particularly in persuading young people not to smoke—the efforts have never been synchronized and integrated the way they can be now.

Croyle encourages the scientific community to become engaged and to conduct new research on product design, nicotine levels, and the effect of the new warning labels. “It’s going to be important for the scientific community to generate evidence that’s going to help FDA exercise their new regulatory authority to eliminate smoking—especially in future generations.”

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