



Teachers and school leaders attending the Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation Youth Summit 2012, held at CHIJ Secondary in March this year

Thank You for Not Smoking

By Eileen Soon and Mark Yeow

Recently, in what has been hailed by the Australian government as a “watershed moment for tobacco control around the world”, Australia’s highest court upheld its Tobacco Plain Packaging Act, overturning legal challenges by the tobacco industry.

The passing of this Act is a great step forward in the fight against the scourge that is tobacco, as it represents a commitment by the Australian government to take steps to curb tobacco use, even with and in spite of considerable tobacco industry opposition. It is clear that Australia has deliberated and decided that the health of its citizens is worth more than caving in to pressure and threats from the tobacco industry. That the decision was supported by all branches of government, including the judiciary, is a significant confidence booster to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as it shows the degree of governmental receptiveness and commitment to this cause. In fact, despite assertions by tobacco companies about the economic ramifications of reducing tobacco sales, stopping smoking actually makes economic sense due to reduced healthcare costs in the long run.

Plain packaging is a simple yet effective concept that aims to reduce the demand for cigarettes by smokers. It does this by removing visual cues and adopting scientifically validated measures to make cigarette boxes as undesirable as possible, in order to reduce the psychological temptation of purchasing cigarettes.

The Act is based on extensive research and studies which have analysed the importance of packaging in tobacco promotion. These studies have showed that plain cardboard packs, with a drab olive green colour, strict rules on the font, size and placement of the brand name, along with graphic health warnings, have reduced the attractiveness of the pack to consumers. Plain packs were also reported to increase behaviours such as hiding or covering the packs, smoking less around others, going without cigarettes and increased thinking of quitting.¹

The implementation of the Tobacco Plain Packaging Act is significant not just in its novel approach, but more so in that the bill has stood up against tobacco industry challenge from large multinational companies with vested interests in this toxic product. This shows that such barriers to tobacco control efforts can be overcome, and paves the way for further efforts in Singapore as well.

In Singapore, our current system mandates graphic health warnings on cigarette packs as a visual deterrent to discourage smokers, in addition to other measures and campaigns. However, this does not parallel the plain packaging act in its entirety, which also more strictly limits the appearance of the cigarette pack. We think that plain packaging would then be the next logical step forward in enhancing the effectiveness of current measures to curb smoking demand in Singapore.

Earlier this year, it was announced that some new tobacco control measures will be instituted locally from March 2013. These include the removal of misleading descriptors of cigarettes such as “light” and “low tar”, including health information on the packaging, lowering

the maximum allowable tar and nicotine yield levels in cigarettes, and banning the sale of mini-packs of less than 20 cigarettes.² The current smoking ban will also soon be extended to include areas such as common corridors, void decks, staircases of residential buildings, sheltered areas, and within a five-metre radius of bus shelters.

Aside from such current measures, it is important to prevent the initiation of youths into the smoking habit as well, to avoid even the beginnings of addiction and dependence. Every year, nearly 7,000 underage smokers are caught, with more slipping beneath the radar. Worryingly, this number is increasing each year, and smoking in youths is a dangerous phenomenon that needs to be addressed. The Towards Tobacco-Free Singapore movement works towards achieving a Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation. The concept is simple: a proposal to prevent sales of tobacco to anyone born after the year 2000, rather than based on age. This slow transition minimises any immediate impact on smokers and retailers, and at the same time is in line with the tobacco industry's claims that they now seek to provide a product only to existing smokers and not to encourage youth uptake. In fact, early surveys have shown strong public support for such an idea, including, significantly, support from current smokers as well.

The idea of a ban preventing sales to those born after the year 2000 is a strictly supply side intervention, however the Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation idea aims to reduce demand as well, but from another angle. With the denormalisation of smoking at the age of 18, this sends the message to youths that smoking is wrong and harmful regardless of what age you are at, and removes the argument that since "I can smoke in a few more years, why don't I do it now?" By getting students in primary and secondary schools in Singapore to see themselves as the Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation, we hope to utilise peer influence in a positive manner to prevent youths from even initiating smoking.

Overall, eradicating smoking in Singapore can be a contentious topic, and is a goal that will require a multi-pronged approach with many concepts and different groups working together to

achieve. While it may be radical to conceive of a Singapore without the presence of these dangerous products, the success of legislating plain packaging in Australia makes it clear that progress can be made and that these dreams are not so impractical after all. The most important thing is that the campaign against smoking must be comprehensive and sustained in order to have an impact, involving support from all walks of Singaporean society, be it governmental, NGOs or the average man on the street.

Perhaps Ruth Malone, editor-in-chief of *Tobacco Control* (an international peer review journal for health professionals and others in all areas of tobacco control), says it best: "Could any of these latest big picture ideas really work? Perhaps not immediately, but they inspire us all to think beyond the next smoke-free ordinance or tobacco quitline." It is visionary thinking, combined with skilled advocacy that pushes governments to act more decisively to protect the public and to rein in the activities of tobacco companies.³ Plain packaging and the Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation notion are complementary and we hope that ultimately, Singapore will be able to bring this dream of protection against the harms of smoking to fruition. **SMA**

References

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Eileen and Mark are currently fourth year medical students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and are involved in the Towards Tobacco-Free Singapore (TTFS) group. TTFS consists of doctors, students and other professionals who are working to bring

about the cessation of smoking in Singapore with their new concept of the Tobacco-Free Millennium Generation. More information can be found on their website: <http://www.TobaccoFreeSingapore.info>, or Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/tobaccofreesingapore>. They would like to encourage all parties interested in TTFS to contact them at dreamoftobaccofreefuture@gmail.com.



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