News analysis

Canada: pharmacy tobacco sales to mentally ill people

The mental health community is finally waking up to the reality of mentally ill people being disproportionately affected by the tobacco epidemic. In Canada, about one in five people are affected by mental illness, and an estimated 50% of them (and up to 90% of schizophrenics) are smokers. They are also less likely to quit than the general population. For this group, too, the high cost of smoking often means that regular meals, family responsibilities, stable housing and other necessities are relinquished, leading to an inevitable exacerbation of a downward drift in society, with more social ills further marginalising them. To retain smokers and recruit new ones the tobacco industry has conducted extensive research on factors impacting on the mentally ill, who may be seen as an easy target - industry documents describe them as ''anxious'', ''psychologically vulnerable'', ''angry'', and ''least likely to quit,'' to name only a few.

There are virtually no cessation programmes designed to accommodate the special needs of severely mentally ill smokers and the barriers to their quitting are perceived by many as insurmountable. Despite a body of evidence that cessation treatment is effective, the majority of mentally ill people do not access effective, individualised treatment. Isolated, positive reform has occurred, with mental health groups deciding to refuse tobacco industry funding and a widespread trend towards smoke-free hospitals and healthcare facilities.

However, in some Canadian provinces "power walls" of cigarette packs in retail outlets remain a powerful marketing tool (see Canada: point of sale win – again. *Tobacco Control* 2005;14:78-79). Their impact on the mentally ill may well be amplified, due to cognitive deficits, impaired decision-making capabilities, diminished motivational and volitional assets, as well as other challenges inherent to mental illness. It has been widely demonstrated that the mentally ill use tobacco to self-medicate negative mood states, symptoms of schizophrenia, cognitive deficits, depression, as well as side-effects of medication. As a result of this vulnerability, mentally ill people face a real risk of a perpetuation of tobacco's already devastating impact.

To add insult to injury, in some Canadian provinces pharmacies still sell tobacco. In these, power-wall tobacco marketing may be particularly problematic for the mentally ill as the pharmacy is the ''place of health'' most must frequent to collect their medication. The conflicts between the dual roles of such pharmacies - counselling on cessation and selling tobacco - has resulted in seven provinces and territories banning the sale of tobacco in pharmacies by law, with an additional ban, in Quebec, by the pharmacists' own professional body in response to a complaint by a member of the public.

In 2005, I filed a formal complaint against every tobacco-selling pharmacist and pharmacy in Alberta. There seemed no reason why the Quebec ruling (and the ethical stance in the seven other provinces and territories) should not also apply to the remaining provinces with pharmacy tobacco sales, including Alberta. There was a general sentiment among pharmacists to help protect the public and not to support tobacco sales; and two large-scale surveys demonstrated overwhelming support for a ban in Alberta's pharmacies. However, the complaint was rejected. It was followed by a second, similar complaint naming five specific pharmacies selling tobacco.

It took more than a year before a response was received. A legal opinion had been sought by the regulatory body and the listed pharmacists had a chance to provide rebuttals. These included: ''tobacco sales are legal in Alberta'', ''tobacco purchases are a matter of choice which the pharmacist should respect'', ''decisions are made on corporate level, and not by the individual pharmacist'' and ''pharmacists do not profit from tobacco, and have no vested interest in the product''. However, the spirit of the overall response was not uniform: one pharmacist removed tobacco from his pharmacy. The complainant was notified that the issue was closed (no disciplinary action followed) and that it was wrong to use the disciplinary route as an indirect means to achieve a specific public policy goal.

The differing interpretation of a critical ethical issue among Canadian provinces remains perplexing, though the invitation of Alberta's pharmacists to jointly seek solutions is welcome. The only remaining hope is for Alberta's government to ban pharmacy tobacco sales, an initiative the premier supported in pre-election surveys. However, the legislative wheels turn slowly, and in the meantime, mentally ill people west of Ontario, like the general population, remain exposed to this most incongruous form of tobacco marketing.

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USA: not so pretty in pink

Pink is a favourite colour of marketers targeting the coveted purchasing power of girls and young women. It is used to sell everything from mobile telephones to golf clubs and pop music. Tobacco companies have also cashed in on this stereotypical colour with products such as Pink Dreams cigarettes. ''The name alone has head-spinning implications. Thoughts whiplash from bubblegum-n-Barbie to provocative porn, depending on your age, gender, and mindset,'' notes the American non-profit organization, Shaping Youth, which aims to counter negative marketing and media aimed at children.

Not only is the outer packaging of the Pink Dreams pack coloured pink, but the cigarette itself is wrapped in pink paper and topped with a gold filter. Described as a super-premium product, this ''fashionable cigarette'' comes ''beautifully gift-boxed in a pink foil package'' and ''offers pure pink smoking enjoyment to today's sophisticated female adult smokers.'' The cigarettes are imported into the United States by Kretek International (KI). KI distributes more than 500 brands of tobacco products from around the world throughout the USA and Canada. The company has positioned itself as leader in the specialty cigarette market.

The popular US-based website www.punkrockdomestics.com, a discussion board for girls and young women seeking counter-culture household tips, features a forum about cigarettes. Website members had this to say about Pink Dreams cigarettes:

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> ''i heard about these cool ciggs called PINK DREAMS has anyone tried…they come in a pink tin, and rolled with pink paper and have a gold colored filter…its [sic] the packaging that kills me!''
> ''My favorite color is pink. I might have to go check out the smoke shop next week''
> ''My friend got a pack of those and let me bum one or two.. I was just excited to be smoking a pink cigarette!''

It is not possible to determine whether these comments were posted by real women talking about real experiences, or by women who were compensated by the cigarette manufacturer to post positive messages on this female-targeted website. Promoters of the Pink Dreams brand could have easily employed young women to join female-targeted websites to introduce the brand to other potential customers—''cigarette girls'' are already an established practice in bars and nightclubs. Or perhaps someone with a commercial interest in selling the cigarettes simply invented them.

The colour pink is also the iconic badge of global breast cancer awareness campaigns, with their distinctive pink ribbons and associated fundraising products. Given the obvious similarities between Pink Dreams packaging and pink ribbon products, it is possible that the manufacturers are capitalising on the emotional connection many women feel to this cause related marketing. Or perhaps it intends to capitalise on the popularity of the Grammy award-winning US singer/songwriter Pink, real name Alecia Moore, who has sold more than 25 million albums since coming to prominence in 2000. Regardless of the precise motivations involved, this is another example of a tobacco company appropriating feminine imagery to sell its deadly products to young women.

USA: Pink Dreams

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Belgium: taking a lead in Europe

For many years, the corridors of power in Brussels, the Belgian capital, seemed to be peopled almost exclusively by tobacco lobbyists. It was not the Belgian parliament that they stalked, but the European Commission, secretariat of the European Union (EU). Their mission was to try to prevent the development of EU directives that would in due course require each member state to enact effective tobacco control legislation in its own parliament. Sometimes the industry lobbyists' stalking would turn into a downright stampede, on occasions, the overwhelming majority of people packing out committee rooms would turn out to be doing the industry's dirty work. Now that the EU has been expanded to 27 countries, it is easy to see why so much effort was poured into the resistance movement, and conversely, how much is owed to politicians and officials who fought it all the way on behalf of health.

Around the world, from Canada to Australasia, Brazil to Thailand, pioneering health ministries have researched, designed, tested and introduced various series of graphic warnings. These have been busy playing their part, millions of times a day, in eroding the lingering air of luxury and bravado that manufacturers still try so desperately to convey to their cigarettes via pack design and whatever other promotional tricks they can get away with.

Belgium never used to be high on any list of tobacco control success or determination by its government, but today it has earned a refreshingly different connotation in public health circles - top of the league in Europe, in fact. Last December, it made cigarette manufacturers print graphic health warnings on tobacco packaging, the first EU member state to do so. The United Kingdom is to follow suit later this year and Romania in 2008. However, considering the scale of the battle that was fought to add such an important element to European tobacco control policy, whose final clearance was issued more than three years ago, it is extraordinary how slow other EU states have been to do the same.

Perhaps the government's zeal is catching: recently a school in the busy port city of Ostend was the centre of a national media frenzy when its plan to force pupils caught smoking to wear a badge was publicised. The badge, whose message was along the lines of, ''This is what my lungs look like now, for all I care,'' also pictured a full colour, graphic image of a smoker's lungs in an apparently advanced state of disease. However, following protests around the country, the scheme was dropped. There were, of course, sound arguments against an approach that pointed the finger of blame and shame entirely at the unlucky young smokers, but the new health warnings have the potential to do the same education job on all smokers, children and adults alike, smoking openly or in secret. The challenge is to keep researching images that will maximise the effect.

Belgium: one of the new graphic health warnings in the first European Union member state to implement them.

European Union: parliament hosts BAT stunt

Just how badly does a company have to behave to be denied special access to politicians elected to safeguard their voters' health and other interests? Despite a long record of doing its utmost to prevent effective tobacco control policies in Europe, British American Tobacco (BAT) has been allowed to hold a lobbying event on its "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) programme in the European Parliament. Using the tired old rhetoric that politicians and parliamentary officials should have learned to decode long ago, BAT billed the event, held in January, as a "stakeholder dialo-

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gue" and part of its 2006 social reporting process.

To try to make politicians and others think that everyone, like it or not, is a "stakeholder" in its wretched business, is one of its most invidious tricks. Politicians worth their salt, not to mention salaries, can surely see through such corporate sophistry? Moreover, they cannot have failed to hear about the widely publicised evidence from BAT's own documents revealing the true nature of its CSR and youth education programmes. Nor does it take much thought to work out how the company justifies spending its shareholders' money on such public relations nonsense. Obviously, it must be aimed at mitigating what the politicians might otherwise do to reduce consumption, the only proven way to reduce future tobacco induced disease.

Commendably, Cancer Research UK, by far Europe's largest health charity, came out strongly against the decision. Dr Jean King, its director of tobacco control, said, "There is a mountain of evidence that tobacco companies cannot be trusted to deliver on their promises of social responsibility." She said her organisation was gravely concerned by the way tobacco companies seemed to be attempting to influence governments. This concern is echoed by tobacco control advocates worldwide, who fear that victories for health in recent years may breed a complacency that allows the industry not just to live with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, but to thrive under it. For BAT, being treated as "normal" by the European parliament must rate as a major step towards renewed normality.

Hong Kong, China: industry's loss of face and smoke

Among the surprises of Hong Kong, long established as a byword for free trade, has been its tendency to be a place where the tobacco industry stubs its corporate toe, and sometimes even comes a real cropper. From an adventure playground for young tobacco advertisers in the early 1980s - the companies must have rated it the last place on earth to stop their energetic entrapment of young people in the nicotine web - it rapidly turned into a public health model for the region. If the industry's overall judgement was often inaccurate, some of its strategies were wildly off the mark. In challenging government tobacco control plans, for example, the tobacco companies' use of massive public relations blitzes, tired old rhetoric and patronising, see-though sophistry, as well as bogus "experts" flown in from around the world, cut little ice with legislators; and the blustering, threatening tone of testimony offered to the fledgling legislative council almost certainly did the industry more harm than good.

To public health workers in Hong Kong, therefore, it was all the more amusing to see the tobacco industry make another big mistake there recently. The occasion was the trade exhibition Tobacco Asia Expo, held in January at the gleaming new AsiaWorld-Expo centre at Hong Kong's international airport. Following the participation of a health representative in a similar show some years ago, such get-togethers are now billed as strictly tobacco industry-only, private shows. Perhaps this strictly enforced secrecy contributed to the mistake.

While the convention and exhibition centre in Hong Kong's Wan Chai district might have been the obvious venue for such a large trade fair, it was rejected on account of its strict smoke-free policy. The organisers were aware that legislators were debating smoke-free legislation for all workplaces, but either thought it would be delayed even longer than the eventual marathon of six years, or that it would be sufficiently watered down to allow smoking areas. But the new law, banning smoking in all workplaces except certain bars and leisure venues, came into force just a few weeks before the start of event (see Hong Kong, China: bad atmosphere for public health. *Tobacco Control* 2007;**16**:3–4). Commenting on the fact that AsiaWorld-Expo was now a totally smoke-free venue, one of the organisers, Glenn John, editor of *Asia Tobacco* magazine, was memorably quoted as saying, "It's kind of a drag." That's just the point, Mr John: for the health of the staff that have to work there all day, nowadays it's no drag at all.

USA: kids chew over movie ideas

The official tourist website of Wyoming, set right in the middle of the USA, says it is the 'cowboy state', and home to more deer and antelope than people. But to oral or "spit" tobacco manufacturers, there are enough people, especially young people, for it to be a lucrative market. Health workers believe that part of the problem has been the promotion of the product as "smokeless tobacco", with the implication that it is safe. Wyoming has lagged behind most other states to combat the problem, which is now being addressed more seriously.

As part of the state health department's "Through with Chew" week in February,

USA: children at work on educational film storyboards as part of Wyoming's "Through with Chew" week.

children who apparently might usually sit at home at the weekend, some with a chewing tobacco tin readily to hand, have been recruited to an unusual programme. Working with AnimAction, a Los Angeles-based outfit that helps young people develop artistic and creative skills through devising and making animated films, more than forty school children attended a day long workshop in January to learn more about oral tobacco and then devise animated films to pass on vital information about its dangers to their peers.

Reportedly, children who already knew that oral tobacco caused mouth cancer had little or no idea of its other dangers, such as its association with cancer in other organs though the ingestion of tobacco tainted saliva. Armed with a much more thorough knowledge, they set about their film work in small teams, knowing that the storylines and designs judged most effective would be made into real animated movies and aired on local television. Perhaps tomorrow's cowboys will be more like the film-makers who make them famous than their tobacco spitting predecessors.

South Korea: pack design bombshell

The former state-owned tobacco monopoly, now known as KT&G and fully privatised in 2002, dominates at home with 72% of the market, and is rapidly expanding abroad, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia, with an eye on the rich pickings to be gained in Russia and China. Since the drab days of state ownership, it has learned fast from its big, international competitors, and a marketing extravaganza at the end of last year showed just how far it has come in slick and sophisticated design.

Unusually, one of KT&G's leading brands, with about 7% of the market, is called Raison D'Etre, and has no Korean name. This fact, and the name itself, the French phrase, often borrowed for use in English and meaning a reason for

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South Korea: some of the Raison D'Etre packs on sale over the Christmas and New Year holiday season.

existence, suggest it is aimed at young—very young—urban, western-leaning consumers. Recent marketing developments amply confirm this.

Since its launch in 2002, Raison - as it is typically known - was already associated with clever presentational ploys. The main image on the pack was a cat in various colours, including blue and green, with regular variations such as a Father Christmas robe at the end of the year. New packs would appear in time to cash in on the country's holiday seasons and be on sale for about two months. Last December, however, the seasonal marketing splash moved into a different league.

Gone was Raison's cat, to be replaced with a variety of highly stylish and colourful designs, including, by the company's proud admission, Indie band, B-boy and X-sports music references, as well as graffiti. Many are not just appealing to youth, but probably only understood by those young enough to put their bodies through the contortions required in South Korea's most fashionable discos.

Unlike the brand's name, the graffiti are in Korean, and plug into a rap lexicon probably more foreign than French or English to any South Korean past adolescence, riddled with teen desire for individuality and rejection of the uncomprehending world of stuffy adulthood. Each ends with the catchphrase that translates as, "It is the reason why I live".

Tobacco ads are banned on billboards and in news media in South Korea, with the exception of up to 60 per year in magazines with adult readerships. Thus pack design, which works at the time of smoking as well as at the point of sale, together with internet promotions, are obvious ways to go to aggressively promote cigarettes and recruit new, young smokers. It clearly works; apart from its high brand share, Raison's popularity among teens speaks volumes.

The maximising of pack design as advertising will no doubt become more prevalent in all countries that fail to implement tough, graphic health warnings that destroy the highly misleading promotional potential of brands like Raison. Public health law makers have to stop precocious advertising that connects with rebellious teenagers seeking to express themselves - "It is the reason why I live." Otherwise, for many of the young people who respond, it may one day be the reason why they die.

Nepal: ad peak overshadows law drafters

Since the government ratified the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) last November, Nepal has seen a massive increase in tobacco companies' promotional activities.

The big cigarette companies - Surya Nepal, a subsidiary of India's ITC and British American Tobacco, and Seti Cigarette Factory, a subsidiary of Philip Morris—have greatly increased their spending in all national newspapers and weekly, fortnightly and monthly magazines, as well as on large billboards in shopping malls, department stores and in public places. Health advocates estimate the increase in spending to be at least tenfold.

In addition, the companies have been sponsoring musical nights at five-star hotels in the capital, Kathmandu, as well as in Biratnagar, the country's second largest city, near the Indian border in the south, and in the western city of Pokhara, one of Nepal's most popular tourist destinations. With names such as Surya Lights Rhythm Nites and Surya Lights Bollywood Temptations: Freedom of Lights Musical Broadway, there is no doubt as to which age groups are being targeted. In addition to promoting its namesake cigarette brand, Surya Nepal has also been sponsoring events in the name of other brands, including Shikhar Lights and Shikhar Filter Kings, including one to exploit the biggest Hindu festival, Shivaratri, celebrating the birth of Lord Shiva, and another clearly aimed at youth and girls.

This huge increase in tobacco promotion may be partly designed to take advantage of the lengthy process of drafting and implementing the new law - local sources say government bureaucracy is notoriously slow. However, another likely explanation is the familiar tactic of the tobacco industry under threat, namely making the news media, hotels and other businesses more dependent on tobacco advertising revenue, to increase pressure for a non-comprehensive tobacco promotion ban. Health advocates have made special representations to the government appealing for swift action and catch-all legislation, and they have even appealed to the companies, but hold out little hope for good news from either.

Nepal: a billboard promoting Surya Lites cigarettes, made by a BAT subsidiary. The brand sponsored music nights in five-star hotels.

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