Consumers’ knowledge and beliefs about the safety of cigarette filters

Editor,—The primary purpose of the cigarette filter is reduction of tar in tobacco smoke. Filters also keep tobacco flakes out of smokers’ mouths. The standard filter used on cigarettes today contains 15 000 fibres per filter.

Several studies have demonstrated that the filter material (cellulose acetate fibres) can become detached. Pauly and colleagues have recently observed cigarette filter fibres in human lung specimens, indicating that the material is respirable. A study of filter fibres implanted in mice for six months demonstrated that fibres resist biodegradation. As a result of burning tobacco, the discharged fibres are also coated with tobacco tar, which contains carcinogens. Such inhaled filter fibres may pose a previously undefined health risk to the smoker beyond exposure to the chemical toxins found in tobacco smoke.

We have found no mention of the problem of filter fibre fallout in advertisements for filtered cigarettes. On the contrary, consumer surveys demonstrate that many smokers believe that filtered cigarettes reduce the risks of smoking.

This study was undertaken to explore consumers’ beliefs about cigarette filter safety and the ingestion/inhalation of cigarette filter fibres. Fifty-three current smokers and 24 former smokers were interviewed while waiting in line at a division of motor vehicles office in Erie County, New York in the summer of 1997. Fewer than 5% of those approached refused to participate in the survey interview. Overall, the sample was 52% male and 48% female; 56% were aged 40 years or younger. A current smoker was defined as someone who has smoked 100 cigarettes in one’s lifetime and currently smokes. Two thirds of the current smokers smoked more than 15 cigarettes per day. A former smoker was defined as someone who had smoked 100 cigarettes in one’s lifetime, but who was not currently smoking at the time of the interview. Most of the former smokers (91%) had discontinued their smoking more than two years before the interview. All but two respondents (one current smoker and one former smoker) reported past use of filter tipped cigarettes.

The brief (approximately 10 minute) survey was administered by a trained research assistant who asked a series of questions designed to measure beliefs about the safety and benefits of cigarette filters. Table 1 displays the responses of smokers and former smokers to six questions. These data demonstrate that most consumers believe that: (1) filters make cigarettes safer; (2) are unaware of the possibility of loose fibres from cigarette filters being ingested and/or inhaled into their lungs during smoking; and (3) cigarette companies should be required to inform consumers about potential for filter fibre fallout. Also, it appears that knowledge about the filter fibre fallout problem might influence at least some smokers to give up cigarettes. Although the sample was not selected to be representative of the entire US population, the consistency of responses across different age, sex, and smoking status groups strongly suggests that the findings from this survey would be reflective of the views of most consumers.

The health benefits associated with putting filter tips on cigarettes continue to be a hotly debated issue. It is not clear that cigarette filters do not make cigarette smoking a safe behaviour and may actually introduce smokers to new risks not associated with unfiltered cigarettes. Smokers favour being better informed about the health risks of smoking. Cigarette manufacturers should be required to inform consumers about the potential for ingesting/inhaling filter material during smoking. In addition, cigarette filter manufacturers should be encouraged and/or required to utilise technology to design cigarette filters so as to reduce the problem of filter fibre fallout.

Table 1 Beliefs about the safety of cigarette filters and the problem of filter fibre fallout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Smokers</th>
<th>Former smokers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think a filter makes a cigarette safer than the same cigarette without a filter?</td>
<td>Yes 30 (58) 14 (58)</td>
<td>No 22 (42) 10 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever noticed if the filter material comes off in your mouth when you smoke?</td>
<td>Yes 3 (6) 1 (4)</td>
<td>No 49 (94) 22 (96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard of any research on whether filter material can get into smokers’ lungs?</td>
<td>Yes 11 (21) 4 (17)</td>
<td>No 42 (79) 19 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If cigarette filter fibres are inhaled into the lungs, would you consider this an additional health risk beyond the exposure to tobacco smoke itself?</td>
<td>Yes 47 (90) 22 (96)</td>
<td>No 5 (10) 1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were to learn that some of the filter material is inhaled into your lungs, would this new knowledge increase your chances of quitting?</td>
<td>Yes 26 (50) NA</td>
<td>No 27 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If cigarette fibres become loose, and the cigarette companies are aware of this, do you think they have an obligation to warn the public about this?</td>
<td>Yes 53 (100) 24 (100)</td>
<td>No 0 (0) 0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presumed health benefits attributed to the reduction of carcinogens by cigarette filters or the health benefits associated with excluding filter fibres from cigarette smoke may not lead to increased benefits overall. The FTC cigarette test method for determining tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide yields of US cigarettes: report of the FTCExpert Committee. Bethesda, Maryland: National Institutes of Health, 1996:59–57. (NIH Publication No 96-4028.)


Smoking prevalence in New South Wales correctional facilities, 2000

Editor,—Since 1974, periodic national smoking prevalence studies have been published for the general Australian population. However, similar studies on prison populations are nonexistent. We report the results of a survey carried out during the year 2000 in 21 of 23 New South Wales (NSW) correctional facilities. These facilities contain about 93% of the state’s total population of prisoners.

We assessed smoking prevalence indirectly by auditing the weekly shopping lists presented by inmates in each facility for at least two consecutive weeks June to November 2000. We calculated the average number of inmates presenting shopping lists as well as the average number of inmates buying tobacco. These shopping lists are usually for non-food items, as food is provided for all inmates. Inmates found to have...
purchased at least one packet of tobacco were recorded as regular smokers. This methodology was pilot tested in two correctional facilities (by comparing with observed number of smokers) and was found to provide an objective and reliable estimate of smoking prevalence.

Of the 5959 inmates who submitted shopping lists during the study period, 4294 (72%) were found to have purchased at least one packet of tobacco. Smoking prevalence ranged from 48–77%, with facilities at both extremes housing male, minimum security inmates.

Smoking prevalence was significantly higher among females (n = 324/402, 81%) compared with males (n = 3980/5575, 71%) (p < 0.001, 95% confidence interval (CI) 5.85 to 14.15).

Inmates smoked cigarettes (n = 1881/2430), compared with 68% (n = 1818/2430, 68%) of men. Smoking prevalence among prison psychiatric hospital wards was 83% (n = 66/80), significantly higher than the average prevalence of smoker inmates in NSW correctional facilities (p < 0.05, 95% CI 1.76 to 19.48). Comparing the smoking prevalence for mentally ill individuals has been reported for the general US community. Smoking rates are known to be consistently high in prison populations. For example, a 1991 statewide survey of 72 county jails in Wisconsin revealed that between 71% and 93% of inmates smoked.

People who are educationally, socially or economically disadvantaged are at increased risk for tobacco use, involved with the legal system, either as perpetrators or victims of crime. Within the context of “diffusion of innovation” theories, cohorts of prison inmates comprise socioeconomically marginal individuals, who are least likely to be affected by mainstream educational strategies for tobacco control. Unfortunately, prison settings were not specifically addressed in the current Australia National Tobacco Strategy. In most correctional facilities in Australia, there is the additional issue of indifference in social concern, and reluctance by correctional authorities to allocate resources and address tobacco use in prisons—an issue that is sometimes perceived as capable of disrupting the “peace” in correctional environments, through protests and riots by inmates.

Preliminary results from an ongoing pilot project on smoking cessation in NSW jails indicate that most inmates who smoke have comparatively less knowledge about tobacco. In line with the diffusion theories, such inmates may be considered not intrinsically unreachable, but as “laggards” who would catch up. Such an approach helps tobacco control workers to avoid victim blaming and focus attention on ways of speeding up the diffusion process. This may be achieved through individual and group counseling sessions on tobacco cessation, wide distribution of prison-based tobacco educational materials, and tobacco cessation programmes incorporating free nicotine replacement therapy. We advocate the introduction of national prison inmate smoking prevalence surveys, and further attention to tobacco control in prisons.

IVITA AWOFESE
Population Health Unit, New South Wales Corrections Health Service, PO Box 150, Manly, NSW 2095, Australia; ivitaawofese@hotmail.com

ROSEMARY TESTAZ
Berrima Correctional Centre

SHIRLEY WYPER
Emu Plains Correctional Centre

SUZI MORRIS
Health Promotion Unit, Department of Corrective Services, New South Wales, Australia

We are grateful to the following individuals for participation in the auditing of inmates’ shopping lists: Michael Levy (72.7% & 64.4% p < 0.05); Beverley Spiers, Jenny Douglas, Helen Packwood, Maureen Fisher, Margaret Jones, Gerhard Gaspar, Dennis Folpy, Caroline O’Connor, Cheryl McAlister, Jannum Bond. Lisa Jackson assisted with statistical analysis.

11 SERGEI PAKRIEV JAKOV SHLIK Department of Psychiary University of Tartu, Baja 31, Tartu, 50417 Estonia
Correspondence to: Dr Pakriev
Sergei.Pakriev@ukim.ee
This work was supported financially by Eli Lilly (Suisse) SA Eeem Filial.

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Both deal with tobacco control and thoughtfulness about policy formulation. These two books give ample opportunity for strong policy formulation processes of social epidemiology concentrations on mapping the contextual, organisational, and personal features of the tobacco control situation in Thailand and Zimbabwe. These case studies were part of the second phase of their policy investigation whose purpose includes contributing to the FCTC (Framework Convention on Tobacco Control) process of the WHO and the development of guidelines to assist policy research in other low and middle-income countries.

Since the purpose is a deeper understanding of the quantitative facts and figures shown in the numerous tables, figures, and appendices of this volume, qualitative interview methods were used along with position mapping to illuminate tobacco control policy efforts. “Tobacco control issues were analysed across categories of tobacco production, consumption and health promotion.”

An identified key future action is the passage of the enabling bill for the Thai Health Promotion Bill now before the National Assembly. As identified in both books, actions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are likely to be central. Thus, I found it interesting that the case report editors feel that academic research institutions are preferable for further research. In fact, the majority of the case findings in the Thai case report come from NGOs (Action on Smoking and Health, and the Thailand Health Promotion Institute) and their leaders. In Thailand, to exclude the research capability and/or information from NGOs would be a mistake.

In another respect, I wonder if the call to expand political economy studies and a broader international strategy for tobacco control research is being considered in light of the larger situation. The utility of the expansion of this kind of research must be balanced with the already recognised need to fund advocacy programmes to get timely policy adoption using accepted best tobacco control methods. Frankly, it is often more palatable for countries and funders to study tobacco control policy than to be responsive to strategic opportunities for policy adoption. I found a lot of useful information in these two slim volumes. Tobacco control can be viewed both as an art and a science. Hatai Chitanondh deals with the strategic art while the passage of the two laws was a visible, positive initiative reflecting strong resolve and an emerging tobacco control direction. Chitanondh’s book shows who the players in this effort were and how they succeeded in passing two complementary tobacco control measures with sweeping articles on advertising, sales and marketing as well as environmental provisions prohibiting or limiting public smoking.

The main thrust of the book involves the processes of political education and strategising. While provisions of the two laws are mentioned, the specific content of the legislation is not discussed in detail except when it is controversial—that is, contested by opponents.

The second book was written by researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. They conducted a political analysis funded by the Tobacco Free Initiative of the World Health Organization. Their political economy approach from social epidemiology concentrates on mapping the contextual, organisational, and personal features of the tobacco control situation in Thailand and Zimbabwe. These case studies were part of the second phase of their policy investigation whose purpose includes contributing to the FCTC (Framework Convention on Tobacco Control) process of the WHO.

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STEPHEN HAMANN

Faculty of Medicine, Rangsit University, Bangkok, Thailand
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NIYI AWOFESO, ROSEMARY TESTAZ, SHIRLEY WYPER and SUZI MORRIS

*Tob Control* 2001 10: 84-85
doi: 10.1136/tc.10.1.84a

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