LETTERS

“At Face Value”: age progression software provides personalised demonstration of the effects of smoking on appearance

The Task Force for Tobacco-Free Women and Girls in New York State is utilizing a computer software program that provides personalised, science-based illustrations of how smoking can affect facial appearance. The task force developed this program at the urging of young people who entered a 1998 essay contest in which middle and high school students were asked to submit their ideas for strategies to help girls reject tobacco. Twenty four per cent of the 2000 entrants from across the state advised that knowledge of the unattractive effects of tobacco use would deter girls from smoking. Their idea is supported by studies suggesting that self image and perception of smoker stereotype can play a role in the decision to initiate smoking.

Several of the students specifically recommended the use of computer imaging. Task force members reviewed available literature on the association between smoking and premature facial wrinkling and provided parameters for customisation of the APRIL (age progression image launcher) program by its creators at C.O.R.E. Digital Productions, Inc in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The original version of this program ages a picture of an 8 year old child to approximately 10 feet by 10 feet (3 m by 3 m) floor space, requiring a PC with three dimensional graphics accelerator, compatible digital camera with tripod, a black backdrop, and two photography lights with stands and dimmers. Each software license is US$5000.

Participating middle, high school, and college students completed surveys before and after being photographed, to establish their prior experiences with tobacco and to detect changes in attitudes about tobacco. The demonstration appears to affect current smokers and never smokers in different ways. In early data, smokers have shown significant change between pre- and post-demonstration responses to the questions: “Do you think that you will smoke a cigarette anytime during the next year?” (86.7% answered “yes” pre; 73.3% post; p = 0.000) and “I think that becoming a smoker reflects poor judgment” (33.3% answered “yes” pre; 43.5% post; p = 0.028). Never smokers, on the other hand, have indicated a change in attitude on the questions: “Do you think that people risk harming themselves if they smoke one or less than one cigarette per day?” (79.2% answered “yes” pre; 92.1% post; p = 0.001) and “Does concern about your appearance affect the choices you make from day to day?” (68.4% answered “yes” pre; 78.5% post; p = 0.043).

This intervention tool often evokes strong reactions from young people. Shrieks, laughter, and exclamations of “I’m never going to look like that!” are frequent. Stunned silence is also common. Many participants comment that in their “aged” versions they resemble an older relative, supporting the software’s projection of future appearance.

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Subsidised nicotine replacement therapy

Miller et al present results from a workplace based smoking cessation study where 39% of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) vouchers were redeemed for NRT patches for half the recommended retail price (RRP $US170, subsidised to $US85).1 However, the authors conclude that cost may not be a barrier to accessing NRT. The New Zealand experience shows that heavily subsidised NRT (92%)...
provided through an existing Quitline service considerably enhances access to NRT for smokers.

A nationwide programme to provide subsidised NRT was implemented from November 2000 through the New Zealand Quitline, a free telephone service for people wanting to quit smoking. Long term cessation rates have been found to improve when NRT is used as part of a behavioural intervention such as counselling.

When smokers call the New Zealand Quitline they are assessed for their eligibility to receive vouchers for subsidised NRT (patches or gum). Eligibility criteria include being a “heavier” smoker (10+ cigarettes/day), being motivated to quit, and 18+ years of age. The subsidisation reduces the cost of NRT to the smoker from a maximum of NZS199 (US$199) for eight weeks’ product to NZS80 (US$80) for the first four weeks’ supply, and NZS10 (US$10) for the second four weeks’ supply. This fee covers dispensing costs and provides a means of encouraging some degree of motivation to quit among smokers. Re-domiciled New Zealanders are claimed by pharmacists through the Ministry of Health’s Health Payments, Agreements and Compliance Unit.

There was significant media interest as a result of the government coordinated NRT media release in November 2000 and the Quitline service was flooded with calls following the launch. Since this time calls have levelled to 9000 per month. Currently, around 41 000 smokers a year register with the Quitline to give up smoking and are issued with vouchers for NRT (from a national smoker population of 740 000). This is a large increase on the number of smokers accessing the Quitline only service before the introduction of the NRT voucher scheme.

Redemption analysis shows that 73% of vouchers redeemed are redeemed, considerably higher than that experienced by Miller et al. Additional New Zealand research found that delivery of the voucher programme through the Quitline is compliant with NRT. A survey of Quitline callers who were positively assessed for NRT found that the process of receiving vouchers and redeeming these for nicotine patches and gum ran smoothly for the respondents. Only a small proportion had the NRT, they were quick to start using it (80% started using their first four week supply within three days of receiving it) and they appeared to have a good understanding about how to use the patches and gum appropriately. Overall, there was little wastage of the nicotine patches and gum. Of those who redeemed their first voucher most (70%) reported using the whole four week course.

The enhancement of the New Zealand Quitline service through the provision of subsidised NRT has been viewed positively by smokers using the service and has greatly increased the number of people accessing the Quitline. Research results indicate that considerable subsidisation of NRT (92% in New Zealand’s case) as part of an enhanced Quitline counselling service indeed provides an incentive to smokers who want to quit.

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Smoking among workers from small companies in the Paris area 10 years after the French tobacco law

Since the introduction of a tobacco law in 1991, smoking in enclosed public areas, including the workplace, has been forbidden in France. At the time this law was introduced we conducted several studies concerning smoking behaviour and the implementation of smoking regulations in the workplace. We believed that it was interesting to repeat our study 10 years later: to assess the prevalence of active smokers in small companies in the Paris area; (2) to assess the prevalence of passive smokers in these companies; (3) to describe the impact of the French tobacco ban in these places of work.

In the French occupational health system, every worker undergoes a medical examination at least once a year regardless of whether they are exposed to occupational hazards. The occupational physician is required to spend one third of their time studying each worker’s work. All smoking workers undergo an examination by a physician who notes down the number of cigarettes smoked, smoking habits, the number of years smoked, and the number of cigarettes smoked per day. Tobacco control is only made after the introduction of a national smokefree legislation, as in Finland.

The 1991 French tobacco law, the initial purpose of which was to protect non-smokers, seems to have led to a decrease in the prevalence of smoking and to a decrease in cigarette consumption, as shown by other studies on smoking policies. The prevalence of regular smokers decreased by 6% in accordance with the conclusions of Farrell et al that “the ban on smoking in all workplaces should reduce the prevalence of smokers by 10%.” In the Paris area, real progress in the fight against smoking in the workplace was only made after the introduction of a national smokefree legislation, as in Finland. This situation could probably be enhanced further if the authorities boosted the French tobacco ban by introducing new stronger national smoking legislation.

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