

is an answer: the skull and crossbones, not just familiar from the flags of cartoon pirate ships, but widely used on containers of poisonous chemicals and other dangerous products and on electrical installations. Together with graphic images of diseased organs, the government included the skull and crossbones in its wish list. But it was not to be.

In a lengthy period of debate, it emerged that the tobacco industry did not just oppose disease-related graphic warnings (though some more than others) but was particularly desperate to prevent the skull and crossbones from appearing. This may at first sight appear surprising, but the manufacturers of bidis, the leaf-wrapped, local product used by millions of lower income smokers, were especially desperate to prevent the government imposing a warning that was particularly effective at reaching their customers.

But how could tobacco interests counter such a simple, universally recognised symbol of poison and danger, especially when it was already part of the government's plans, which meant that an amendment would have to be debated in parliament? The debate generated much favourable comment and media coverage for the government's plans, which should have been quite sufficient for it to stick to its guns. However, a pernicious argument was then wheeled out by industry interests: the skull symbol would be offensive in a religious sense, especially to those people, such as Muslims, who bury their dead.

Public health researchers swung into action. A survey of more than a thousand people not only confirmed that the symbol was the most widely understood to mean danger, especially by less literate, rural people, but also that the religious argument was nonsense. More than nine out of ten Muslims shown the symbol said it would not hurt their religious sensibilities, with only 1.4% saying it would do so. Similar figures for Hindus and followers of other religions showed how baseless it was, but for reasons that may never be known, the industry prevailed and the amendment to remove the skull and crossbones warning was passed. But with proven and growing public and parliamentary support for more effective tobacco control, will the government not show greater political courage and let the roller coaster pick up speed again next time?

Mauritius: poorer people like tough warnings

Another country where health advocates have been researching the acceptability of



Mauritius: cigarettes marked with a skull and crossbones received overwhelming approval in a survey, even by smokers.

having a skull and crossbones on cigarette packs, as well as on each individual cigarette, is Mauritius. Health organisation ViSa carried out a detailed survey with people visiting prison inmates, which among other benefits got responses from a sample of the country's less affluent citizens. Both their mocked up packs and cigarettes got highly favourable ratings as to general acceptability, and concurrence with the view that such warnings might help smokers quit and deter those who do not yet smoke from starting. Such ideas would have been unlikely to be taken up by the government in the past when British American Tobacco (BAT), the dominant player in this small country with Africa's highest per capita cigarette consumption, seemed to hold great sway. However, times are changing, and in the face of declining tobacco consumption, BAT recently closed its factory in Mauritius. Perhaps the large sums BAT used to spend on schemes such as its undergraduate

scholarship scheme for gifted young people to study at the University of Mauritius may turn out not to have been money well spent.

South Africa: Swedish snus snare

British American Tobacco (BAT) recently sent a delegation of South African members of parliament to Sweden on a "fact finding" trip, to learn about the blessings of snus oral tobacco. The trip was organised by a group called the Association of Reduction of Tobacco-related Harm (ARTH).

When a draft programme came to light just two weeks before the start of the trip, it revealed that the snus manufacturer Swedish Match and other pro-snus promoters were to entertain members of the group, who were to stay at the most prestigious hotels and dine at the very best restaurants during their five days in Sweden. Strangely, no tobacco control experts or government officials in Sweden seemed to know anything about the visit until a copy of the draft programme came to the attention of Doctors Against Tobacco (DAT). In order to offer the group a broader picture of Swedish conditions and the snus issue in particular, DAT members then emailed the chairs of the two chambers of the visitors' parliament, inviting the group to a meeting during their stay in Stockholm.

A few days before the group's arrival, DAT was contacted by the South African embassy in Stockholm, expressing the



Mauritius: a Pall Mall cigarette pack from Thailand and one sold in Mauritius: Mauritian smokers strongly supported the idea of their government adopting Thai-style health warnings.