

For once, truth in tobacco advertising: it is 'better to die' than to not smoke (better for tobacco companies, that is)

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In this issue, Hurt and colleagues (*see page 306*) use tobacco industry documents and other materials to analyse how the transnational tobacco companies have penetrated Indonesia, bought up traditional kritek manufacturers and influenced policymaking there to thwart effective tobacco control. In global public health terms, Indonesia is an especially egregious case of a government's abject failure to protect citizens. The only Asian country not to ratify the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Indonesia not only permits but abets and encourages some of the most aggressive tobacco advertising in the world, including tobacco advertisements featured on police traffic kiosks.¹

In an Industry Watch piece featured in this same issue, Sebayang and colleagues (*see page 370*) describe a billboard advertising campaign executed in Indonesia by Philip Morris International-owned company Sampoerna that takes the already-ubiquitous tobacco advertising in Indonesia to a new low. The company has long sought to portray smoking as a natural part of being young and having fun together with friends. As the authors note, during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadhan, the company launched a campaign that was, on reflection,

remarkably frank in capturing the underlying assumption driving ALL tobacco companies as they continue to promote deadly products: that it is 'better to die' than not to smoke their cigarettes.

The ad for *Sampoerna A Hijau* cigarettes featured friends in the doorway of a crowded bus, reaching out to a friend running to get on the bus as it pulled away. The tag line, translated: 'It is better to die than to leave a friend behind.' Beside this image, the cigarette brand itself was referenced as 'a fun friend,' the one ostensible 'friend' that should not be left behind. The advertisement was a clear effort to recapture Muslims who might have quit smoking for Ramadhan—similar to the ways US companies have targeted smokers (especially those who are older and becoming more concerned about their health) around New Year's Day, another time when people traditionally try to quit.²

Confronted by tobacco control activists, Sampoerna apparently claimed that the depiction was meant to convey 'solidarity'. Solidarity with what? Tobacco company profits?

This is not the first tobacco advertisement to use death as a marketing vehicle, but to do so in Indonesia, a country with such an already spectacularly high burden of tobacco use (particularly among men), reveals an unprecedented level of cynicism and greed even for the tobacco industry. Perhaps because to date Indonesian politicians have, like policymakers in many

other countries, been unwilling to challenge their corporate masters and institute effective tobacco control measures to protect public health, tobacco companies have been emboldened. While tobacco companies might prefer that smokers lived longer to buy more cigarettes, even the major multinational companies themselves now acknowledge their products' deadliness. Yet not one company has decided to quit selling cigarettes, even among those busily and loudly claiming to be working on 'reduced exposure' products because they care so much about their consumers. For the tobacco companies, it really is better for Indonesians (and all their other customers elsewhere in the world) to die than for them to quit smoking—or not start.

Despite the valiant efforts of Indonesian public health advocates, Indonesian citizens remain subject to the most aggressive tobacco marketing in the world, unable to enjoy the same rights to health that their counterparts in other countries with strong tobacco control policies enjoy. 'Better to die'? See <http://youtu.be/DiyWK3fzTpA> for a video that shows how the industry is exporting its most aggressive strategies, those no longer permitted in most wealthy countries, to Indonesia.

This is corporate genocide.

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