Australians: use of cigarette vending machines

To the Editor—Public health officials have focused attention on the nature and extent of youth access to tobacco in the United States. Studies have clearly shown that minors can purchase cigarettes unfettered. While model legislation calls for comprehensive measures to thwart youth access to tobacco, many communities have initially focused on regulating cigarette vending machines.

Tobacco control advocates, as well as the tobacco industry and retailers, recognize that a small percentage of youth tobacco sales is through vending machines. However, vending machines should be cause for concern because of their ubiquitous nature.

A highly publicised mall intercept survey commissioned by the National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA) found that teenagers (13–17 years old) generally used over-the-counter sources for purchasing cigarettes. However, a closer look at the NAMA results shows that one sees that the younger the youth, the more likely they will be to use a cigarette vending machine. The survey showed that 13-year-olds were 11 times more likely to use a vending machine than 17-year-olds.

In the spring of 1993, more than 60000 students in grades seven, nine, and 12 (12–18 years old) participated in the Pennsylvania tobacco survey for students, which was conducted for the Pennsylvania Department of Health. Using a 121 item self-completed questionnaire, administered in a classroom setting, this research aimed to collect baseline data about youth behaviour patterns and attitudes about cigarettes and smokeless tobacco. These students came from a stratified random sample of 371 public and non-public schools. Care was given to the proportional representation of the geographic, ethnic, gender, economic, and grade composition of the state. A total of 60778 students was surveyed, including a random sample of 5563 students and an over-sampling of 5215 students in various target areas. After excluding the oversampled respondents and unusable questionnaires, the population on which our results are based is 54741 students.

Our study examined the finding that the younger the adolescent, the more likely that they will use a cigarette vending machine rather than over-the-counter sources (that is, convenience stores, gas stations, supermarkets). Seventh graders (12 to 13 years old) were 2.2 times more likely to “perceive” vending machines as the easiest place to buy cigarettes than ninth graders (95% CI = 1.2 to 3.0). Seventh graders were 6.6 times more likely to “perceive” vending machines as the easiest place to buy cigarettes than 12th graders (95% CI = 6.3 to 7.0).

When students were asked on a multiple response question where they actually bought cigarettes, the younger students were more likely to cite vending machines as a source. Seventh graders were 1.5 times more likely to buy cigarettes from vending machines than ninth graders (95% CI = 1.4 to 1.7). Seventh graders were 2.6 times more likely to buy cigarettes from a vending machine than 12th graders (95% CI = 2.3 to 2.8). A Pearson's \( \chi^2 \) test with one degree of freedom found each of these comparisons to be highly significant (\( p < 0.001 \)). While the overall volume of cigarette sales to minors is small in comparison to the sales to older persons, the younger, experimental smoker is at greater risk of purchasing from a cigarette vending machine. Tobacco control groups should be aware of this risk to such a vulnerable target audience and should adjust their educational programmes and policies accordingly.

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Son of Premier

To the Editor—In 1988, the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) introduced a unique cigarette product called Premier.1 This product was unique because, unlike conventional cigarettes, Premier heated rather than burned tobacco, thereby significantly reducing tar yields. In October 1988, RJR began test marketing Premier in two American cities (Phoenix, Arizona, and St Louis, Missouri). However, it did not sell well in these cities and was removed from the market in February 1989.

The concept of a smokeless tobacco product, however, did not die with Premier. On 27 November 1994, a New York Times article revealed that RJR was testing a second generation of "smokeless tobacco" called Eclipse.2 Like Premier, Eclipse heats rather than burns tobacco, but is designed somewhat differently.3 RJR has been conducting consumer tests of Eclipse in eight different American cities, including Buffalo, New York.4

One week after the New York Times story on Eclipse, we undertook an informal mall intercept survey to determine consumer awareness of and interest in the "smokeless cigarette". We were curious to see how smokers perceived this product, and were interested to see if non-smokers might be induced to try smoking Eclipse, or responding to marketing campaigns by asking individuals at three shopping malls in Buffalo to participate in a 5 minute interview on cigarette smoking. Overall, interviews were completed with a total of 125 individuals, 94 of whom identified themselves as smokers and 31 of whom identified themselves as non-smokers. During the interview, participants were asked demographic questions about their smoking habits, as well as questions about their knowledge and perception of Eclipse.

To our surprise, 15% of smokers said they had heard of Eclipse and were willing to try it. The majority of smokers were interested in learning more about Eclipse and its potential benefits. Many smokers expressed a desire to reduce their exposure to secondhand smoke. However, it is unclear whether this product will be a viable alternative to smoking tobacco, given the potential health risks associated with its use.