Australians are smoking more cigarettes in public places. Whether, when, and how this happens will depend on the success of the Australian public health community in presenting the issues in a way that is informative and persuasive to the media, the public, and elected representatives.

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Adolescent use of cigarette vending machines

To the Editor—Public health officials have focused attention on the nature and extent of youth access to tobacco products 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 publicized mail 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, when they were more than twice as likely to use a vending machine. The survey showed that 13 year old smokers were 11.5 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.

Son of Premier

To the Editor—In 1988, the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJR) introduced a unique cigarette product called Premier. This product was unique because, unlike conventional cigarettes, Premier heated rather than burned tobacco, thereby significantly reducing the tar yield. 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 product of smokeless tobacco called Eclipse. Like Premier, Eclipse heats rather than burns tobacco, but is designed somewhat differently. RJR has been conducting consumer tests of Eclipse in eight different American cities, including Buffalo, New York.

One week after the New York Times story on Eclipse, we undertook an informal mail-intercept survey to determine consumer awareness of 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. We recruited our respondents 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 94 persons, including 26 smokers, 28 former smokers, and 40 individuals who had never smoked. Only two individuals were approached to be interviewed refused participation in the study.

While the overall volume of cigarette sales to minors is larger than the in the United States, the new product is not as popular as the cigarette. 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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60% of the respondents stated that they had heard about the Eclipse cigarette. However, the majority do not bother to describe potential benefits associated with the Eclipse cigarette. The most mentioned potential benefits were addiction and disinterest. The vast majority of respondents answered affirmatively to a question about whether Eclipse should be subjected to government testing for safety. However, when asked whether Eclipse should be sold alongside regular cigarettes or whether 70% of the people who smoke should be available like cigarettes. Anecdotally, comments received from respondents to our survey give us the impression that both smokers and non-smokers are sceptical about claims being made about the safety of Eclipse in relation to conventional cigarettes.

A recent study showed that about 70% of adult smokers in the United States want to stop smoking. However, it would be difficult to stop smoking do so out of concern for their health.