LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters intended for publication should be a maximum of 500 words, 10 references, and one table or figure, and should be sent to the editor at the address given on the inside front cover. Those responding to articles or correspondence published in the journal should be received within six weeks of publication.

Smoking in enclosed shopping centres: employee and public responses to simulated violation

EDITOR,—The last decade has seen a lowering of the Australian community's acceptance of smoking in public places.1-4 International research investigating compliance with smoking restrictions in public places is scarce, however. An Australian study evaluated compliance with legislation enforcement policies involved unobtrusively dressed volunteers lighting a cigarette and allowing it to burn for five minutes. An observer noted the number and type of non-smoking signs and level of activity around the smoker. When a reaction occurred, the type and nature of the reaction was recorded. A multiple logistic regression was performed to identify associations between a reaction and the study factors: area of Sydney, type of signs, level of activity, smoker's age, and sex.

A total of 99 simulations were carried out in 44 shopping centres, 93 of these by female smokers aged in their late 20s. Twenty nine (29%) simulations resulted in a reaction: 5 (5%) were verbal, 18 (18%) were a hostile look, 3 (3%) were abrupt movements away, and 3 (3%) were other types of reactions (for example, fanning of the air). Men and women reacted with equal frequency. The majority of the verbal responses were made by security guards (60%), while customers were more likely to respond with a hostile look rather than a verbal response.

Table 1 shows that the highest rate of reaction occurred in the affluent north Sydney (44%), with 17% and 19% of the simulations occurring in central and eastern Sydney, respectively, resulting in a reaction. A significant trend was found for an increased reaction rate when the centres were busier (χ² = 4.75, p = 0.03).

The smoking simulations resulted in a low reaction rate, however, with only 5% of the simulations eliciting a verbal warning, although the frequency of reactions increased when the centres were busier. Ideally, the current study would have had more simulations with an even distribution of male and female smokers of different ages and ethnic background.

The findings of this study support the enforcement of non-smoking policies as a key role for security guards. A security guard approaching a smoker as part of his or her job avoids the breach of the smoking regulations. The presence of signs banning smoking was associated with a greater frequency of warnings.

We sought to evaluate the frequency and nature of reactions to simulated violations of smoking regulations in enclosed shopping centres in central Sydney, Australia, and two more affluent areas in north and east Sydney in 1998-99.

Shopping centres with an existing non-smoking policy and which were centrally managed were eligible for the study. The simulated violation of smoking policies involved unobtrusively dressed volunteers lighting a cigarette and allowing it to burn for five minutes. An observer noted the number and type of non-smoking signs and level of activity around the smoker. When a reaction occurred, the type and nature of the reaction was recorded. A multiple logistic regression was performed to identify associations between a reaction and the study factors: area of Sydney, type of signs, level of activity, smoker's age, and sex.

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The findings of this study support the enforcement of non-smoking policies as a key role for security guards. A security guard approaching a smoker as part of his or her job avoids the breach of the smoking regulations. The presence of signs banning smoking was associated with a greater frequency of warnings. It may also be due to a perceived “easy going” Australian nature or a reluctance to engage in potentially confronting situations.

Concurrent strategies that would facilitate enforcement and remind smokers and non-smokers of the non-smoking norm in enclosed shopping centres could include public address reminders for shoppers, more prominent signage, and education of staff regarding the non-smoking policies and procedures.

The acceptability of smoking in enclosed public places has been steadily decreasing, as evidenced by the high proportion of such places with non-smoking policies, although the public appears reluctant when confronted by violations to these policies. In light of other research in this area which has shown very low rates of verbal responses from non-smokers when second hand smoke is found harmful and annoying, the low rate of reactions in this study are not surprising. To some extent this may result from the perceived “easy going” Australian nature or a reluctance to engage in potentially confronting situations.

A lack of knowledge about what appropriate action to take owing to the relative rarity of seeing someone engaging in smoking in a non-smoking area in Australia.

Thanks to the Public Health Unit of Central Sydney Area Health Service and to our volunteer smokers: Malcolm Choat, Rachael Hammond, Lin Hou, Jane Min, Lyndall McLellan, Leonie Cambage, Stephanie Miller, Vincenza Colaluca. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital ethics review committee.

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Tobacco education in Cairo, Egypt: is there an effect on adolescent smoking?

EDITOR,—As cigarette consumption in the US has fallen, and tobacco companies have come under criticism for allegedly targeting youth in their advertising, many companies have focused more on overseas markets to maintain their profits. Egypt, with the highest tobacco consumption in the Arab world, appears to be a lucrative market for cigarette manufacturers. While adult cigarette consumption is declining or stagnant in the US, it is growing in Egypt at a rate of 4–5% a year. In the US smoking typically starts during adolescence: 89% of daily smokers tried their first cigarette on or before age 18 years.
and 71% of those who have ever smoked daily have also initiated smoking by 18.
This trend appears to hold true in Egypt as well: the modal age for onset of smoking is 14–15 years old. The purpose of our survey was to examine the level of tobacco education in Egyptian schools and to determine whether exposure to the health risks of tobacco is related to smoking prevalence.

Mr Mohamed Helmi Abd Raboh, an inspector general in the Egyptian Ministry of Education, conducted a survey of secondary students (ages 14–18 years) to obtain information on both the prevalence of adolescent smoking in Egypt and the level of student knowledge of tobacco health risks. The survey was conducted in 1998 on a convenience sample of 302 students from Cairo and the surrounding cities of Giza and Kalyoub.

The overall prevalence of current smoking was 8.3%, with significant sex differences (13.2% males, 3.3% females). Important predictors of current smoking were peer norms, perceived benefits of smoking, and knowledge that smoking is addictive. Furthermore, exposure to extensive education on the health risks of smoking was the most important predictor of knowledge of addiction. The effect of an extensive school tobacco education had a beneficial effect.

Most of the Egyptian students surveyed in this study reported having some level of tobacco education, yet there was great variability in the extent of this education among the respondents. It appears that education on tobacco risk has an indirect role on smoking prevalence among Egyptian adolescents. Tobacco education was shown to be the most important factor in determining the students' knowledge that smoking is addictive, while this knowledge was the strongest predictor of whether or not the students were current smokers. Efforts to standardize educational outreach between males and females, in addition to increasing the level of exposure to information on the health risks of smoking, may help diminish the smoking prevalence among Egyptian adolescents.

Figure 1 Effectiveness of tobacco health education class on related knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and smoking behaviour.