Cigarette packaging needs to change, study says

May 18 2011

The messages that cigarette pack labels convey to smokers and nonsmokers have been evaluated by Roswell Park Cancer Institute (RPCI) researchers in three studies published in the June 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. The conclusion from these studies is that manufacturers have deceived consumers about the risks of their products for years and that remedial actions are needed so consumers can make informed decisions about the products that they purchase.

"Tobacco companies have used attractive packaging and persuasive images to market their products for decades. These studies support efforts by the FDA to regulate cigarette pack labeling," said lead author Maansi Bansal-Travers, PhD, Behavioral Research Scientist at RPCI.

Tobacco manufacturers have effectively used cigarette pack design, colors and descriptive terms to create the illusion that filtered and so-called light/mild cigarettes are safer than unfiltered and full-flavor cigarettes, when this is not the case. Beginning in June 2010, regulations contained in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act have prohibited tobacco companies from using descriptive terms such as "light," "mild" or "low" in advertising and on cigarette packaging. "While the removal of these obviously misleading terms was a good first step, we discovered that cigarette manufacturers have circumvented the regulation by using different terms such as 'gold' and 'silver' and changing the colors on packs to continue to mislead consumers about their products," said Dr. Bansal-Travers.

The paper titled "What Do Cigarette Pack Colors Communicate to Smokers in the U.S.?" found that both colors and descriptors are perceived by smokers to communicate health-risk information. The authors recommend that color-coding be restricted in the same way that descriptors have been to reduce consumer misperceptions.

The paper titled "The Impact of Cigarette Pack Design, Descriptor, and Warning Labels on Risk Perception in the U.S." found that larger graphic health warnings that convey negative messages are the most effective in communicating health risks to adults and that packs with descriptors such as "smooth" or "silver," or in specific colors, misleadingly conveyed lower health risks to consumers. The authors concluded that manufacturers should be barred from using any labeling that might be misperceived by consumers and that all cigarettes be sold in standardized plain packs.

The third paper, titled "Correcting Over 50 Years of Tobacco Industry Misinformation," analyzed proposed corrective statements required by U.S. federal court in the Department of Justice case against cigarette manufacturers. The study found that the proposed corrective statements were effective in correcting false beliefs about smoking and health. The authors also recommended that these statements be printed on cigarette packs and at the point of sale.

K. Michael Cummings, PhD, MPH, Chair of the Department of Health Behavior at RPCI, added, "These studies reveal how consumers are likely to respond to government-mandated changes in package labeling and offer insights and recommendations about how to correct decades of misleading product marketing, so that consumers can make more informed choices about the products they purchase."

More information: The paper abstracts are available at www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2811%2900161-9/abstract,

www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797
%2811%2900166-8/abstract and
www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2811%2900163-2/abstract.

Provided by Roswell Park Institute