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Canadian-style Cigarette Warning Labels Would Deter Smokers, New Study Reveals

U.S.-style labels have little influence on tobacco sales

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Washington – Large, graphic warning labels on cigarette packages similar to those used in Canada would serve as an important deterrent for new smokers and would encourage current smokers to quit, according to a research study released here today.

“There is no more efficient method of reaching smokers than through the use of graphic and highly visible warning labels,” concluded researchers from the University of Oregon and the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

“Current warnings in the United States are easily ignored and do not transmit the same level of emotional impact as the colorful and graphic Canadian warnings,” noted Paul Slovic of the University of Oregon, one of the authors of the study.

The findings were detailed today at a media briefing at the National Press Club. Samples of the Canadian labels were on display.

Warning labels on U.S. cigarettes have not changed since 1984, and research suggests they have little influence on tobacco sales. The new study published in the April issue of *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* comparing the current warnings with the ones used in Canada finds that the Canadian warnings would more effectively communicate the risks of smoking.

In that study, Canadian labels – which cover half the front and back of each pack and include color photos – were found to be “more emotionally powerful” than U.S. labels, which consist of black and white lettering squeezed onto the side of a cigarette package. In addition, the study found that a majority of smokers recommended the use of the more graphic labels for the U.S. market.

“Our study clearly shows that the current warnings in use in the U.S. could be greatly improved and would help to educate both smokers and nonsmokers about the hazards of the habit,” says Dan Romer of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Adolescent Risk

Communication Institute and one of the authors of the study. “If we really care about reducing the harmful effects of smoking, we should adopt these more effective warnings.”

A treaty sponsored by the World Health Organization, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, was signed by the U.S. in 2004 but never sent to the Senate for ratification. The treaty obligates ratifying countries to require that warning labels cover at least 30 percent of the front and back of the cigarette pack and recommends that warning labels cover at least 50 percent of both panels and include graphic images. Countries have three years after ratifying the treaty to put the new warnings in place. The treaty has been signed by 168 countries and ratified by 145 countries. Canada instituted its new warning requirements in 2000.

Congress currently is considering legislation (S. 625/H.R. 1108) that would give the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the authority to regulate tobacco products. The legislation would require health warnings that cover at least the top 30 percent of the front and back of cigarette packs. The FDA would have the authority to increase the warning size to 50 percent of the front and back panels and adopt graphic or pictorial warnings.

“The new study indicates that current U.S. warnings are woefully ineffective at getting the attention of smokers, communicating health risks or motivating smokers to quit,” said Matthew L. Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. “Congress this year has an historic opportunity to reduce tobacco use and save lives by passing the legislation granting the FDA authority over tobacco products.”

Joining Paul Slovic and Myers at the briefing was Geoffrey T. Fong of the University of Waterloo in Canada who has studied the effectiveness of the graphic warning labels now in use in many countries. In an article in the March issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Fong and his colleagues concluded that “larger pictorial warnings, such as those implemented in Canada and seven other countries to date, are likely the most effective means of communicating the full range and severity of health risks to smokers.”

The U.S. warnings “performed poorly compared to those in the other countries,” the study concluded. “The health warnings that appear on the side of U.S. cigarette packages provide even less health information than many other, more benign consumer goods.”

Tobacco use is blamed for 400,000 deaths in the U.S. annually. Tobacco-related health care costs total \$96 billion annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania conducts research in the fields of political communication, information and society, media and the developing child, health communication and adolescent risk. The Policy Center, established in 1993, has offices in Philadelphia and Washington.

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