

TOBACCO

POLICY

By now, you will have seen what a complicated issue smoking is. It is a legal product, and used by one-third of the adult population.¹ Until recently, it was widely advertised, and it remains freely available to everyone except children. The industry involves farmers and manufacturing companies, and employs many workers. The tobacco companies are large and powerful, and are quick to oppose restrictions to what they see as their rights to trade freely.^{2,3,4} Through taxation, State and Federal Governments earn a lot of revenue from smoking.⁵ Tobacco is also highly addictive,⁶ kills one in three of its users,⁷ and even affects the health of those who choose not to smoke,⁸ but breathe in smoky air from other peoples' cigarettes. There is no other product quite like tobacco.

How on earth do you tackle these problems? Obviously there is no single solution to such a complex issue. Instead, the approach most likely to succeed must be made up of many different components.

This is where policy-making comes in. A policy addresses problems in a constructive way, and sets out a realistic blueprint for action. Policies about smoking can be made on a personal level, a community level, or by governments. TAP 9 looked at policies made by schools, organisations and other community groups. In this TAP unit, we are going to study the things governments can do about tobacco use.

A comprehensive plan

The World Health Organisation has devised the following five-point policy for reducing the damage caused by smoking, or 'smoking control':⁹

1. Reduce the number of people smoking

The main aim is the achievement of lower smoking rates in all age groups of the population. This can be reached in a number of ways, including health warnings on tobacco packets, increased taxation so that cigarettes are more expensive to buy, limiting the places where smoking can take place, supporting the rights of the non-smoker to breathe smokefree air, and by funding information and education programs.

2. Reduce the number of people starting to smoke

Non-smokers should be encouraged to remain non-smokers (particularly children, as most smokers take up smoking while they are still in their teens).

3. Remove tobacco advertising and smoking promotion

Pressure and encouragement to smoke in the form of tobacco advertising and promotion should be removed. This includes advertising through sponsorship and product placement in movies.

4. Cut down, and quit

Those who have not stopped smoking are to be encouraged to reduce their exposure and risk, as far as possible, to the harmful components of tobacco smoke, for example by smoking fewer cigarettes a day.

5. Work together

Health, medical and other organisations concerned about smoking and health should work together towards this aim.

Reading through this list, you will be aware that a number of the suggestions put forward by the World Health Organisation have been acted upon by governments in Australia. But change has not always been easy.

Putting it into action

Changing the law can be a very lengthy process. In deciding the types of laws to be introduced, many issues need to be considered, including:

- * Who will be affected by the proposed changes?
- * What community support or opposition is there to the proposal?
- * Will the majority of the community benefit by the changes?
- * What costs are associated with the proposed changes?
- * What are the long-term effects of the changes?

The companies that make cigarettes have strongly argued against most forms of legislation about their products, and at times this has made the process of change very slow and difficult. Although we have known for 40 years that tobacco is a dangerous drug, most of the laws relating to tobacco are quite recent.

These are some of the ways in which Australian governments have acted to reduce the problems caused by smoking in the community.

Health warnings

It is logical that if a product that causes illness and even death can be sold, then information on what can happen if you use it should be included on the packaging. Putting health warnings on tobacco packages is an important way of giving people information about what smoking can do. However to be of any use, the labels need to be easy to see and understand.

There have been warnings on Australia's cigarette packets since 1973. The first warning used was 'Warning - Smoking is a health hazard'. During the mid 1980s four new warnings were introduced, and these are still in use until 1993. They are:

1. Smoking causes lung cancer
2. Smoking damages your lungs
3. Smoking causes heart disease
4. Smoking reduces your fitness

Health warnings should be changed from time to time. This keeps the messages fresh and makes sure that they are as effective as possible. At a meeting in April 1992, all government health ministers in Australia agreed to introduce regulations to require new health warnings on cigarette packets from July 1993:¹⁰

1. Smoking causes lung cancer
2. Smoking causes heart disease
3. Smoking causes emphysema
4. Smoking is a major cause of stroke
5. Smoking causes peripheral vascular disease
6. Smoking reduces your fitness
7. Smoking kills
8. Most smokers develop permanent lung damage
9. Your smoking can harm others
10. Smoking is addictive
11. Stopping smoking reduces your risk of serious disease
12. Smoking in pregnancy can harm the unborn child

It was agreed that the whole of the back of cigarette packs will carry detailed information about the health effects of smoking, and smokers will also be given more information on the packs about the contents of cigarettes.^{10,11}

Taxation

Both the Federal Government and the State Governments have a tax on cigarettes. When the Government raises its tax on tobacco, this pushes up the price of cigarettes in the shops. The more expensive cigarettes become, the more likely people are to quit smoking. Taxes have the greatest effect on young people who don't have so much money, and are not so addicted to smoking.¹²

In Victoria and some other states, the Government has decided to make tax increases a part of their health policy on tobacco. They have raised the tax to help discourage young people from smoking, and have put the extra money into supporting sports, health education campaigns and health research.

Selling tobacco to young people

Selling tobacco to young people is illegal in every state and territory of Australia. In Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia and Northern Territory, it can only be sold to people over the age of 18. In the other states, the minimum age is 16. In all states and territories it is illegal for shop keepers to sell cigarettes to children, even if they have been asked by their parents or other adults to buy them.

Smokefree areas

Smoking has long been banned in certain places, mainly due to hygiene and safety. These include kitchen and food preparation areas in public eating places, areas where dangerous chemicals and other substances are stored or handled, and in public buildings because of fire hazard (for example in theatres and cinemas). Smoking has also been banned or restricted on most forms of public transport, including domestic aircraft.

Since we have found out that passive smoking is dangerous to health (see TAP 5), smoking in the workplace and in public places has become an important issue. Each State Government in Australia has laws which mean that the workplace must be safe for the people who work there, and for people who visit it. These laws are called the Occupational Health and Safety Acts. Now that passive smoking has been proven to be a danger to health, many organisations are going smokefree. The Federal Government was among the first large organisations to make their offices smokefree. The Commonwealth Department of Health became smokefree on 1 December 1986, and all other Commonwealth public service departments became smokefree by March 1988. You can find out more about smokefree policy in TAP 9.

Education campaigns

Information and education programs form the core of a policy for smoking control.⁹ These campaigns can:

- * Raise public awareness about smoking and health
- * Persuade smokers to give up smoking and provide advice and materials on how this might be done
- * Influence non-smokers to remain non-smokers (especially young people)
- * Create awareness that fewer and fewer people smoke
- * Establish the rights of the non-smoker
- * Introduce discussion about legislation and health policy
- * Criticise tobacco industry activities and counter misinformation.

Education campaigns can give a general message to a wide audience (for example by using television advertisements), or can be aimed at a special target audience, like schoolchildren or pregnant women. A well-run campaign will suit the target group's background, level of understanding, and interests.¹³ There are many ways information can be made available to the community. Hospitals, community health centres and other health and medical groups, sporting groups, workers' health action groups, trade unions, youth groups, schools, women's groups and professional and business organisations can all take part in education campaigns and help people be informed about smoking.¹⁴

In Australia, education programs on smoking and health have mostly been run by State and Territory Governments, often in partnership with a range of health groups such as the state cancer societies, the Heart Foundation of Australia, and drug and alcohol foundations. Victoria and some other states have increased funding to education programs on smoking and health by increasing tobacco taxation.

Advertising and promotion

Tobacco advertising is designed to make smoking attractive and appear like a good thing to do. It tells people that smoking will make life more enjoyable, but does not tell them that one in three people who smoke will die from disease caused by smoking.⁷

Twenty years ago, there were no restrictions on tobacco advertising in Australia. Cigarettes were advertised on radio and television, as well as in newspapers and magazines, in cinemas and on billboards, in fact anywhere that the tobacco companies wanted to place their messages.

The Federal Government phased out television and radio advertising, which stopped completely in 1976 (although the tobacco companies have still managed to get a lot of television coverage for their brands by sponsoring sports - see TAP 7). During the 1980s, a number of states and territories, (including Victoria),¹⁵ introduced legislation to take tobacco advertisements off billboards and out of cinemas, and off the front of shops. Free samples of cigarettes, and competitions run by the companies as a way of advertising their brands, have also been banned. Some states also banned sponsorship by tobacco companies, except for certain events. The Federal Government banned tobacco advertisements in newspapers and magazines in late 1990,¹⁶ and has announced that it intends to ban advertising by sponsorship as well.¹⁷

The tobacco industry has objected to advertising bans every step of the way,¹⁸ although the public has supported the governments' moves.^{19,20,21,22} You can find out more about tobacco advertising and whether it should be banned in TAP 7.

Contents of cigarettes

The Federal Government has made an agreement with the tobacco companies that cigarettes made and sold in Australia may not contain more than 14 milligrams of tar, 1.4 milligrams of nicotine and 20 milligrams of carbon monoxide per cigarette. Newer brands of cigarettes cannot contain more than 18 milligrams of carbon monoxide.²³ Brands of cigarettes for sale in Australia are tested each two to three years by government scientists, and the results are made available to the public.

Tobacco Policy - Activities

1. Ask your grandparents or other older adults about smoking laws that existed when they were young. Look up 'spittoon' and 'smoking jacket' in an encyclopaedia. How have things changed?
2. Make a list of areas other than health promotion and sport sponsorship that could benefit from money derived from the tobacco tax. Draft a letter explaining them to your local member of parliament.
3. Survey a range of people to see if they know what the health warnings are on cigarette packets. How do they feel about the warnings? Do the warnings have an influence on their attitude to smoking? Do the warnings encourage people to stop smoking? Make up some new warnings or labels.
4. Consider how contents labelling (tar, nicotine, carbon monoxide and other substances in tobacco smoke - see TAP 2 for more information) could be improved. Write a letter with your recommendations to a newspaper.
5. Imagine you are the Minister for Health and want to discourage young people from starting to smoke. You have received many letters from people requesting that the age limit for young people obtaining tobacco products be raised from 16 to 18. What will you do?
6. Some people think that if the sale of cigarettes was made illegal, then the problem of smoking related diseases would be solved. Would this sort of legislation work? What kinds of problems might you expect?

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