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Evidence brief

Tobacco point-of-sale display bans



Abstract

Tobacco use is the most preventable cause of death globally, claiming over 100 million lives worldwide in the 20th century. In the presence of increasing tobacco advertising bans, point-of-sale displays of tobacco in retail establishments are a way for the tobacco industry to continue advertising its products, using the pack as an advertising tool. Two major reviews of the literature agree that existing evidence supports a positive association between exposure to point-of-sale tobacco promotion and smoking, and both support a ban on point-of-sale displays for tobacco products. Banning point-of-sale tobacco displays is likely to reduce impulse purchases, provide a supportive environment for smokers to quit and reduce purchasing behaviour. Countries that have implemented bans have seen large reductions in smokers' reported exposure to advertising, with impulse purchases also reduced. Article 13 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control bans tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, including point-of-sale displays.

Keywords

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Contents

1 Background

- Tobacco use

- Point-of-sale displays

- WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

2 Evidence

- Effect of point-of-sale displays on purchasing

- Impact of banning point-of-sale displays

- Effect on young people

- Industry criticism

- Public support for bans

4 Current bans in Europe

- Results from countries that have implemented bans

6 Internet sales

6 References

Background

Tobacco use

Tobacco use is the most preventable cause of death globally, claiming over 100 million lives worldwide in the 20th century (1). It dramatically increases the risk of developing serious diseases, such as lung cancer and chronic obstructive lung disease (2). Across Europe, rates of tobacco smoking are around 28% (3): although they are falling, they remain stubbornly high in some groups, and vary widely between countries (1).

Point-of-sale displays

In the presence of increasing tobacco advertising bans, point-of-sale displays of tobacco in retail establishments provide a way for the tobacco industry to continue advertising its products by using the pack as an advertising tool. The tobacco industry has become more reliant on point-of-sale displays as an advertising strategy (4), using items such as clocks, lighting and towers to attract the attention of consumers (Box 1).

BOX 1

Ways in which point-of-sale displays encourage tobacco purchasing

① **An unmet need** 
Shoppers' awareness can be raised through advertising so they feel they have an unmet need.

② **Fulfil the need** 
Interest can follow if a customer sees a product that can fulfil the need.

③ **Evaluation** 
Evaluation takes place before consumers make a purchase to see how the product could benefit them and how it compares to similar products.

④ **Trial** 
Retailers will often try to lower the barriers to making a first purchase as it is a key stage to smoking initiation, so consumers may purchase the product on a trial basis.

⑤ **Adoption** 
Adoption can lead to repeat purchases of the same product or brand.

WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

In 2003, the World Health Assembly adopted the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), which entered into force on 27 February 2005 (6). Fifty of the 53 Member States of the WHO European Region have ratified the treaty, which aims to keep tobacco control high on the global agenda, save lives and improve global health. The WHO FCTC includes measures to minimize tobacco demand and supply through a variety of evidence-based interventions, one of which (Article 13) bans tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, including point-of-sale displays (7):

To ensure that points of sale of tobacco products do not have any promotional elements, Parties should introduce a total ban on any display and on the visibility of tobacco products at points of sale, including fixed retail outlets and street vendors. Only the textual listing of products and their prices, without any promotional elements, would be allowed.

Evidence

Effect of point-of-sale displays on purchasing

Point-of-sale displays in retail establishments have a particular impact on impulse purchases. A large study from Australia suggested that over 25% of smokers purchased cigarettes at least sometimes on impulse as a result of seeing the cigarette display, and that over one third of recent quitters or those trying to quit experienced an urge to buy cigarettes after seeing point-of-sale displays (8). Another study based in the United States of America suggested that point-of-sale displays increased tobacco sales by 12–28% (9). Displays also have a negative impact by tempting smokers who are trying to quit (9,10).

Impact of banning point-of-sale displays

Two major reviews of the evidence surrounding point-of-sale bans have been conducted, one in 2009 (11) and the other in 2015 (12). Their aim was to measure the effect of bans on smoking behaviours, and both studies supported banning of point-of-sale displays of tobacco products. The 2015 study (12) noted that “the existing evidence supports a positive association between exposure to POS [point-of-sale] tobacco promotion and smoking” and that these findings are consistent across different study designs, settings and measures. It quoted the earlier review and noted that more recent studies provide even stronger evidence of an association. Because many of the recent studies looked at people who had never smoked and showed that increased exposure to point-of-sale displays led to increased tobacco purchasing-behaviour, it suggested strongly that these displays were influencing smoking status.

Banning point-of-sale tobacco displays is likely to reduce impulse purchases, provide a supportive environment for smokers to quit and limit purchasing behaviour through the denormalization of tobacco (12).

Effect on young people

Point-of-sale displays can particularly affect young people's smoking prevalence and experimentation. The tobacco industry denies that its advertising is aimed at young people; evidence suggests consistently, however, that exposure to tobacco advertising and promotion increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to smoke (13). A recent meta-analysis found that young people more frequently exposed to point-of-sale tobacco displays have around 1.6 times higher odds of having tried smoking and around 1.3 times higher odds of being susceptible to future smoking, compared with those less frequently exposed (14).

Data from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey of 130 countries found that banning point-of-sale tobacco displays was significantly associated with a reduction in experimental smoking in young people of both genders (15). Another study found that countries with point-of-sale bans in place had seen a reduction in current, daily and regular smoking rates among young people in the previous month (16). The introduction of point-of-sale display bans is also likely to reduce children's perception of smoking prevalence among their peers, which contributes to the denormalization of tobacco (12).

Industry criticism

The tobacco industry understandably is opposed to bans on point-of-sale displays for its products (17,18). The main reasons it cites are impeding competition, disputed benefit to public health, and cost to retailers.

The evidence detailed above shows that these displays can increase tobacco purchasing and influence smoking status, and are associated with tobacco experimentation among young people: banning point-of-sale displays should therefore help to reduce tobacco use. The tobacco industry has been critical of the evidence surrounding point-of-sale bans. Despite the small effect sizes in some studies, these bans are still meaningful at population level, and the existing research may be underestimating the true effect size (12).

The cost to retailers is also cited as a reason against point-of-sale bans. Recently, during the process of implementing a ban in the United Kingdom, the Association of Convenience Stores estimated the cost to each retailer of implementing the ban to be up to £10 000 (around €11 500) (19). Experience from Ireland, however, was that the average cost to the retailer was around £300 (€350), and the industry funded over 90% of the cost in four out of every 10 shops (20,21).

The tobacco industry is using many different tactics to maximize the visual appeal of its packs (22,23). In addition, so-called tobacco brand families have been growing steadily (24). This means that a brand has an increasing number

of variants for sale, which takes up more display space and increases the advertising space of tobacco products.

Public support for bans

Public support for point-of-sale display bans has been measured in many of the countries that have gone on to implement them. In Norway, more than 70% of non-tobacco users and around 30% of daily smokers were in favour of a ban (25). The 58% of the population of Ireland who supported a point-of-sale ban before it was implemented increased to 66% following implementation (26). A survey completed in the United Kingdom found that 73% of adults in England supported a ban (27), while an Australian study found that 49% of smokers supported a ban and only 12% opposed it (the remainder were indifferent) (9).

Current bans in Europe

As of 2015, 8% (4 of 53) of the countries in the Region have banned point-of-sale displays for tobacco products (28).

Results from countries that have implemented bans

A study compared two countries (Australia and Canada) that imposed bans on point-of-sale tobacco displays with two which at that time had not (United Kingdom and United States). It found that smokers' reported exposure to tobacco advertising from these displays declined steeply from 74.1% to 6.1% in Canada and 73.9% from 42.9% in Australia. It also found that impulse purchasing was lower in countries with the ban than those without (29).

Studies in other countries, including Ireland (26), New Zealand (30) and Norway (25), showed positive results, especially among young people; these bans will likely show their full benefits over time when increasing numbers of young people never start smoking, having a positive impact on population health (Box 2).

BOX 2

Impact of removing point-of-sale tobacco displays: data from a survey of young people in New Zealand

⊙ Background

In July 2012, New Zealand required the removal of point-of-sale tobacco displays concurrently with increased enforcement and penalties for selling tobacco to minors and additional restrictions on tobacco sponsorship.

⊙ Method

Data from annual surveys of more than 25 000 14–15-year-old students were analysed before and after these measures were implemented.

⊙ Results

Between 2011 and 2014, smoking experimentation decreased from 23% to 17%; current smoking prevalence declined from 9% to 7% and initiation in the last year decreased from 13% to 11%. Attempted purchase of cigarettes in the past 30 days among smokers decreased from 30% in 2012 to 26% in 2013.

⊙ Conclusions

The introduction of a point-of-sale display ban and concurrent measures was followed by significant reductions in initiation, experimental and regular smoking, and attempted purchase of cigarettes, with reduced association between visiting tobacco-retailing stores and smoking behaviours. The findings suggest that point-of-sale display bans are important components of strategies to reduce smoking initiation among young people.

Source: Edwards et al. (30).

Internet sales

Tobacco products can be purchased online in many countries: this is effectively a point-of-sale display. The WHO FCTC (6) states:

Internet sales of tobacco inherently involve advertising and promotion as defined in the Convention. ... The most direct way of avoiding tobacco advertising or promotion on the Internet is to ban tobacco sales on the Internet.

As of 2015, 39 of the 53 countries of the European Region (74%) had banned tobacco advertising on the Internet, but only 11 (21%) had banned sales of tobacco products on the Internet (28). The level of advertising allowed at point-of-sale varies by country, but usually involves a picture of the pack. Some countries could strengthen their tobacco control measures by implementing this ban (31).

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