

Introduction

The theme for World No Tobacco Day in 2009 is “Tobacco Health Warnings”. Health warnings on tobacco product packaging are critical to any effective tobacco control strategy. They increase public awareness of the serious health risks of tobacco use and help to ensure that the packaging tells the truth about the deadly product within.

Article 11 of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control commits more than 160 Parties to requiring that tobacco products “carry health warnings describing the harmful effects of tobacco use”.¹ In addition, the guidelines to Article 11 that were adopted in 2008 by the Conference of the Parties to the international treaty stipulate that the warnings should appear on both the front and the back of the package, be large and clear and describe specific illnesses caused by tobacco.² In addition, the WHO MPOWER technical assistance package to support countries’ implementation of the WHO Framework Convention stresses the importance of tobacco health warnings to increase people’s awareness of the dangers of tobacco use.³

Tobacco is unique among legal consumer products – and not in a positive sense. It is the only such product that kills when used exactly as intended by the manufacturer. Up to one half of all smokers will die from a tobacco-related disease, and half of these will die prematurely.⁴

Yet tobacco product packaging in most countries provides little or no information to warn consumers of the risks. This reality is reflected in the lack of appreciation of the health risks of tobacco use among the general public, and even among health professionals.

Tobacco package health warnings that include images are a particularly powerful and cost-effective vehicle for communicating health risks. This is because:

- warnings that use pictures or graphics in addition to text have been shown to be particularly effective in communicating risk and motivating behavioural change;
- pictorial warnings are critical in communicating health risks to the large number of people worldwide who cannot read;
- pictorial warnings detract from the overall attractiveness of tobacco packaging and thus act as a deterrent to new users, who are often young and image- and brand-conscious;
- the cost to governments is minimal.

Pictorial health warnings are overwhelmingly supported by the public. Smokers appreciate and act upon the information provided by strong warnings.

More and more countries are requiring pictorial warnings on tobacco packaging. As of 31 May 2009, 23 jurisdictions with a combined population of nearly 700 million require large graphic health warnings on packaging. Several others – Djibouti, Mauritius, Latvia and Switzerland – have finalized legislation to implement pictorial warnings later in 2009 and in 2010.



Picture warnings from Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, Thailand and Brunei Darussalam

World No Tobacco Day 2009 campaign



left:

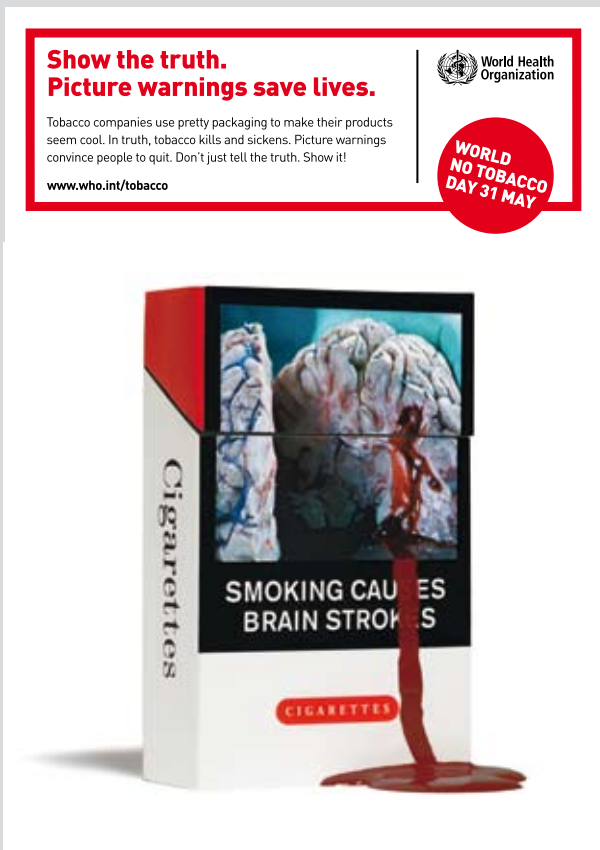
© World Health Organization 2009
 designed by Fabrica (art: N. An, photo: P. Martinello)
 teeth photo © Province of British Columbia

bottom left:

© World Health Organization 2009
 designed by Fabrica (art: G. Riva, photo: S. Scattolin)
 brain photo © Commonwealth of Australia

bottom right:

© World Health Organization 2009
 designed by Fabrica (art: G. Riva, photo: S. Scattolin)
 child photo © World Lung Foundation



Jurisdictions with pictorial package warnings – as of 31 May 2009^a

Jurisdiction	WHO region	Year pictorial warnings first implemented	Population ^b (x 1000)
Canada	Americas	2001	32,649
Brazil	Americas	2002	186,771
Singapore	Western Pacific	2004	4,484
Thailand	South-East Asia	2005	65,306
Venezuela	Americas	2005	27,031
Jordan	Eastern Mediterranean	2005	5,537
Australia	Western Pacific	2006	20,701
Uruguay	Americas	2006	3,314
Panama	Americas	2006	3,284
Belgium	Europe	2006	10,542
Chile	Americas	2006	16,443
China (Hong Kong SAR)	Western Pacific	2007	6,857
New Zealand	Western Pacific	2008	4,185
Romania	Europe	2008	21,584
United Kingdom	Europe	2008	60,587
Egypt	Eastern Mediterranean	2008	72,009
Brunei Darussalam	Western Pacific	2008	383
Cook Islands	Western Pacific	2008	21
Malaysia	Western Pacific	2009	26,440
Iran, Islamic Republic of	Eastern Mediterranean	2009	70,603
Peru	Americas	2009	27,377
Kyrgyzstan	Europe	2009	5,192
World population with pictorial warnings			671,300
Percentage of world population with pictorial warnings			10.18%

The recently approved implementation guidelines for Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention,² combined with existing momentum for the implementation of strong health warnings on packages in many countries, make pictorial warnings a timely theme for World No Tobacco Day 2009.

^a Note that the requirement for a pictorial warning may or may not indicate best practice in other requirements relating to warnings. The countries listed have varying specifications of the size, rotation and location of pictorial warnings.

^b Source of all statistics: United Nations Statistics Division. Demographic yearbook 2006. Estimates of mid-year population, 2006, Table 5. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dyb2006.htm>, accessed 2 April 2009.