

CARRREPORTING

PUTTING TOBACCO IN PLAIN PACKAGES

Marielle Smith draws out the lessons from Australia's policy approach to reduce smoking.

Since the US Surgeon-General first warned against the devastating health impacts of tobacco back in 1964, governments across the world have been scrambling to find ways to reduce its use and consequences.

In Australia, plain packaging has become central to achieving this objective. Implemented in October 2012, the Tobacco Plain Packaging Act 2011 and the Tobacco Plain Packaging Regulations 2011 prohibit the use of logos, brands and promotional text on tobacco products and their associated packages. They also restrict the colour, size, format and materials used in cigarette packaging. Where cigarettes were once sold in colourful, glossy cartons they now can only be presented in a drab dark brown box plastered with graphic health warnings. Even the iconic camel has vanished from Camel Cigarettes.

Plain packaging is just the latest amongst a series of significant measures to curb tobacco usage, including graphic health warnings, consumption taxes and restrictions on smoking in public places. Collectively, these measures have had considerable impact. However, encouraging existing smokers to stop smoking remains a fraught journey as some 29% of Australian smokers tried and failed to quit smoking in 2010. For policy makers, preventing new people from taking up the habit, particularly young adults, is essential to any regulatory effort to reduce tobacco harm. The plain packaging policy seeks to influence not just smokers, but potential smokers as well.

Despite failed attempts to implement similar plain packaging policies in Canada and the United Kingdom, Australia was the first country to successfully turn such ideas into law. With no precedent, there was an insufficient scientific evidence base from which the Government could effectively draw to support this policy decision. The tobacco industry and its allies cried 'nil evidence'. They launched a widespread and aggressive media, lobbying and legal campaign that culminated in an

unsuccessful High Court challenge to overturn the legislation. Tobacco companies continue to this day to pour resources into attempts to discredit the success of the plain packaging policy.

Yet by early measures, the policy has worked. Whilst the impact of plain packaging on potential smokers is difficult to measure, research conducted by the Cancer Council in Australia has shown that plain packaging has had a significant effect on existing smokers' attitudes and behaviours. Smokers of plain packaged cigarettes reportedly perceive the product to be lower in quality and less satisfying. After the policy's implementation, there was also a substantial spike in calls to quit smoking telephone services.

This case raises interesting questions about Evidence Based Policy Methods (EBPM), which have become a favoured tool of public policy in recent decades. In Australia, EBPM were pushed in 2007 by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and have since been enthusiastically supported by senior bureaucrats and administrators across government.

In the complex world that is public policy making, EBPM provide a promise of something stable: a scientific approach to decision making capable of neutralizing the many pitfalls that arise from uncertainty. Under EBPM, policy should not be implemented unless there is scientific knowledge to support claims to better policy making. One pillar of EMPB is the randomised controlled trial, in which survey participants are assigned to two groups at random and exposed to different policy options.

The very concept sounds too perfect to be credible. How could anyone argue that more evidence in public policy making could be a bad thing? There are numerous policy measures that have been implemented using an EBPM frame that have been successful. So too are there many instances of policy failure that could be sourced back to a lack of evidence in the decision making process. But what are we to make, then, of effective public

policy measures like plain packaging that do not adhere to EBPM methods? Do such instances challenge the value of EBPM, or do they teach us something new? Had an EBPM frame been applied to plain packaging, it is unlikely the policy would have been implemented. Nevertheless, it has been an effective public policy, delivering on its stated objective to reduce tobacco use.

And of course, the Australian Government did not introduce their policy blindly. Rather, they had an array of evidence that stemmed beyond academia and science to support their decision – political consensus and local knowledge even though this kind of knowledge was not considered relevant by EBPM standards.

In innovative measures like plain packaging, not only is EBPM not useful to the decision making process, it is nonsensical. There will never be scientific evidence strong or compelling enough to meet the requirements of EBPM if there is no test case on which to pre-establish a measure of success. The easy appeal of EBPM can distract from other indicators of policy success or failure. The lesson from Australia is that policy makers should not let this happen.



Marielle Smith holds an MSc in Public Policy and Administration with Distinction from the LSE. She currently works as an adviser to the Honourable Julia Gillard, 27th and former Prime Minister of Australia.



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