

Pictorial Health Warning on Tobacco Products

Myths and Realities

Myth: health warning labels are ineffective.

Reality: NO.

Health warning labels in many countries are ineffective because they do not meet size, message, or graphic image requirements. Instead, they are small, unnoticeable and provide unclear or misleading information. The most effective warning labels are large, clear, and cover at least 50% of the package's principal areas (front and back of the product package). Messages should include the magnitude of specific risks and should include pictures, especially to cater to audiences with low literacy. Research shows that effective warning labels increase knowledge about risks associated with tobacco use, and can persuade to quit.

Myth: Consumers already know the risks of Tobacco use.

Reality: NO.

Studies show that large proportions of consumers have inadequate knowledge of the health effects associated with smoking and underestimate the severity and magnitude of those risks. An understanding of both the risks and severity of smoking are important factors in motivating smokers to quit. Picture-based warnings can be effective in conveying the severity of those risks. Smokers report that they receive more information about the risks of smoking from the tobacco product package than from any other source except television.

Myth: People here buy single cigarettes, they won't even see packages.

Reality: NO.

Warning labels should be adapted for all types of tobacco packaging not just the cigarette pack. If the pictorial health messages are large and clear enough, people will see them when they are displayed for sale, when they are taken out of smokers' pockets and purses, and when they are discarded. Warning labels are one of the cheapest and widest-reaching forms of public education available, whether people are buying single cigarettes or packs

Myth: Rotating messages can be too expensive and difficult to maintain.

Reality: NO.

The technology required to print color warnings is widespread. Tobacco companies change their packaging all the time to promote new products, new flavors, and other new forms of deception. It is neither difficult nor expensive to add new warning labels. As a matter of fact, bidi packets that are exported from India carry pictorial health warnings as per the legislative mandate of the countries which import them

Myth: If the government wants to put out health warning messages, it should use billboards or TV commercials.

Reality: NO.

Tobacco packaging has universal reach, and the cost of package warnings is paid for by tobacco companies, not government. Further, the combination of a mass media campaign and effective pictorial warnings is more useful than a mass media campaign on its own

Myth: Pictorial health warnings not essential on bidi packets.

Reality: No. It is essential because:

- Bidi is the most popular forms of smoking tobacco. Nearly 53% of tobacco consumption is smoked as bidis with nearly a trillion bidis produced in India every year compared to 100 billion cigarettes.
- Out of 100 million people who smoke bidis, over 6 lakh die annually. Bidi smoking causes cancer, tuberculosis and serious heart and respiratory diseases (40% of all cancers are associated with tobacco use)
- Majority of bidi smokers are illiterate and under privileged. They are least knowledgeable about the harmful effects of bidi smoking. Pictorial health warning would inform them appropriately, saving many from death, illness and associated economic costs that push them into perpetual poverty..

Myth: Bidi are less harmful than cigarettes.

Reality: NO.

Bidis are more harmful than cigarettes. There is convincing scientific evidence to prove this. In one study of 100,000 persons in Mumbai, the excess risk of death in bidi smokers was 51% higher than cigarette smokers.

Myth: Laws pertaining to depiction of pictorial health warning on tobacco product packages lead to unemployment.

Reality: No.

In other countries with similar pictorial warnings on tobacco packages, tobacco consumption steadily decreases no more than 1% per year. It is impossible for this to lead to a substantial decrease in employment, soon after implementation of the law.

It is predicted that there will be close to 1.7 billion smokers in the world, in 2020 and more than 2.2. billion in 2050. Even when it is assumed that the prevalence decreases at an annual rate of 1% for the next 20 and the next 50 years, the total predicted number of smokers would still stand at more than 1.3 billion in 2020 and 2050.

Myth: If pictorial health warnings are implemented the livelihood of millions of bidi workers will be lost.

Reality: No.

This is a very misleading statement and the bidi industry has been especially vocal in raising this false argument when it comes to the question of implementing pictorial health warnings on tobacco products

In a recent study conducted by Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) amongst 1000 bidi workers of West Bengal and Gujarat totally disproved this argument. The study revealed the truth and grim realities of the bidi workers. It also exposes the exploitations of bidi industry and broke the myth that the livelihood provided by this industry is nothing but a vicious cycle of poverty, misery, exploitation and death where the bidi workers are trapped. The study revealed that:

- Occupational hazards in the working population ranges from tuberculosis and over 75% of the total respondents suffered from multiple illnesses. Workers live a life of misery, constantly handling hazardous substances and exposing themselves to the risks of contracting TB, asthma, lung, skin, spinal problems among other diseases.
- There is a blatant violation of the Child Labor Regulation Act (1956) with large number of children engaged in the bidi making process. There is also a complete lack of transparency in the way the bidi industry operates, flouting the provisions specified under the labour law and violating basic human rights, especially the rights if women and children
- One of the interesting findings from Anand, Gujarat reveal that the bidi workers, the majority (73%) of whom are bidi smokers, are in **favour of pictorial health warnings on bidi packets**.
- Over 95% of the respondents from both the states expressed the desire to shift from their present occupation provided other livelihood opportunities are available to them.

Myth: The bidi industry cares about the well being of the workers.

Reality: No.

The Industry claims that over 10 million are employed in the bidi industry, yet very few workers have been given health cards or ID cards that are mandated by special cess on excise on bidi. The bidi industry by and large, has been found to violate basic welfare , minimum wage and child labour legislations. The way to improve life of bid rollers would be to provide them with alternate employment opportunities which are equally viable or even better in terms of financial return.

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