



FACULTY OF  
PUBLIC HEALTH MEDICINE

Submission to the Oireachtas Joint  
Committee on Health and Children  
on  
Outline Heads of the Public Health  
(Standardised Packaging of Tobacco) Bill  
Jan 2014



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## 1. Introduction

The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland has a commitment to reducing health harms in order to protect the long-term health of the nation. RCPI's Trainees, Members and Fellows have a key leadership and advocacy role to play in supporting individuals and communities to take effective action for good health. Drawing on their knowledge and expertise, evidence-based policy has been developed in key areas of healthcare such as alcohol, healthcare-associated infection and sexual health. More recently RCPI has also established policy groups on Obesity and Tobacco, and advocates for national policy to address these issues.

RCPI's Faculty of Public Health Medicine is specifically concerned with protecting and improving the health of the nation, and as such seeks to influence policy makers with a view to improving and protecting the health of all populations. The Faculty has engaged in action on smoking in numerous ways:

- Spokespersons from the Faculty have provided accurate evidence-based health information to the public on the health dangers of smoking.
- The Faculty has made pre-budget submissions to the Department of Finance recommending fiscal measures to reduce smoking rates.
- The Faculty has presented research and information on Tobacco harms at public meetings, Faculty Scientific Meetings and other RCPI events.
- The Faculty of Public Health Medicine and the HSE jointly established the Clinical Care Programme in the Prevention of Chronic Disease which includes smoking as one of the key risk factors for chronic disease.

## 2. Executive Summary

While we have made much progress in tobacco control in this country in recent years, the toll of tobacco related deaths, disease and disability is still unacceptably high. The recently published policy document from the Department of Health, *Tobacco Free Ireland*, recognises this, and has set a target smoking prevalence of 5% or less for adults in Ireland by 2025. Achieving this target will require a rate of progress greater than we have been achieving to date.

The Faculty of Public Health Medicine fully supports the approach set out in *Tobacco Free Ireland* and it is our view that implementation of this Bill, coming as it does, in the context of other strong policy measures in recent years, will bring us one step closer to the day when children in this country can grow up free from tobacco addiction.

We fully support the legislation, which is comprehensive and addresses the issue of plain packaging in detail. Based on our review of the bill, and informed by the most recent research including systematic reviews published on plain packaging, there are a number of additional recommendations we would like to see included in the final legislation:

- Size and dimensions of packs should be specified in the Bill (Head 5).
- The term ‘dull and drab colour’ requires more definition and should take into account recent research on colour and harm perceptions (Head 5).
- Ambiguity on the use of variant names on packaging should be addressed (eg whether ‘menthol’, ‘light’ etc may be used in variant names).
- On the colour of the ‘brand text’, ‘business or company name or variant name’, we recommend that the most recent research regarding colour and perception be used to inform these regulations.

### 3. Main Body of Submission

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#### Health Impact of Smoking

Tobacco is a lethal, addictive drug that kills when it is used as it is supposed to be used. One out of every two people who smoke long term will be killed by tobacco. *Tobacco Free Ireland*, the first policy document to be published in the context of ‘Healthy Ireland’, the Government’s overall policy to promote the health and wellbeing of the nation, aims to reduce smoking prevalence in Ireland to 5% of the population, from its current level of 22%.

Data presented by RCPI’s Faculty of Public Health Medicine at its Winter Scientific Meeting in 2011, and referenced in *Tobacco Free Ireland* highlights the following:

- Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in Ireland.
- Each year at least 5,200 people die from diseases caused by tobacco use, representing approximately 19% of all deaths. These deaths are

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caused by Cancers (44%), Circulatory Diseases (30%), Respiratory Diseases, (25%) and Digestive Diseases (1%).

- 2005 figures show that the percentage of all mortality attributable to tobacco use in Ireland was 20% for men and 16% for women. This is higher than the EU average for men (23%), and more than double the EU average for women (7%).
- The Irish Heart Foundation reports that smoking causes up to 5,300 strokes and 500 stroke related deaths per year.

In addition to the health costs - which are experienced by both smokers and by exposure to second hand smoke, the high economic cost of smoking is also an imperative for action. Irish health expenditure on smoking related diseases was estimated at €500 million in 2009, and the cost of premature mortality was estimated at €3.5 million in the same year.

## Smoking prevalence

*Tobacco Free Ireland* outlines the key data around smoking prevalence in Ireland. We know from statistics gathered by the National Tobacco Control Office that smoking prevalence among adults has decreased over the past 10 years, from 29% in 2003 to 22% in 2012. This decrease in smoking prevalence is key evidence that more stringent tobacco control policies have worked, and a similar decrease in smoking prevalence has been observed in other countries where sustained and comprehensive tobacco control programmes have been implemented, such as the UK, Australia and Canada.

Smoking prevalence among Irish children has also decreased, from 21% to 12% between 1998 and 2010. It is reasonable to attribute this substantial decrease to policies such as the ban on sale of packs of less than 20 cigarettes and the ban on display at point of sale. Strong tobacco control policies do work, especially for children.

Health inequalities among lower socio economic groups are frequently exacerbated as a result of lifestyle risk factors such as alcohol, smoking and obesity. We know from SLÁN surveys that those in lower social class groups are more likely to smoke and this is particularly true for women within these groups. It is also worth noting that lung cancer has overtaken breast cancer as the commonest cause of cancer mortality in women.

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## Evidence in support of plain packaging of cigarettes

Plain packaging or standardised packaging means that cigarette packs would all look the same, all packs having a standard shape without branding, design or a logo. Specific features of plain packs<sup>1</sup> are:

- The shape, colour and method of opening the pack will be the same, no matter what brand of cigarettes it is;
- Cigarette packs will be a standard shape, size and colour;
- Picture and text health warnings will take up the majority of space on the packs;
- Brand names will be in standard type face, colour and size;
- The duty paid stamp will remain with covert markings that show the pack is not counterfeit.

## Systematic Reviews on Plain Packaging

One of the most recent and relevant pieces of research on plain packaging is a systematic review<sup>2</sup> carried out by the Centre for Tobacco Control Research at the University of Stirling (Moodie report). The review published in 2013 is an update to a 2012 systematic review carried out by the same group examining the potential impacts of plain packaging. In both reviews, impacts were analysed under the following categories, based on potential impacts identified by the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control:

- Appeal
- Perceptions of harm
- Salience and effectiveness of health warnings

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.cancer.ie/>

<sup>2</sup> Moodie C, Angus K, Stead M and Bauld L (2013). *Plain Tobacco Packaging Research: An Update*. Stirling, Scotland: Centre for Tobacco Control Research, Institute for Social Marketing, University of Stirling.

The 2012 review which examined 37 studies stated the following:

*“ This review found that there is strong evidence to support the propositions set out in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control relating to the role of plain packaging in helping to reduce smoking rates; that is, that plain packaging would reduce the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products, it would increase the noticeability and effectiveness of health warnings and messages, and it would reduce the use of design techniques that may mislead consumers about the harmfulness of tobacco products. In addition, the studies in this review show that plain packaging is perceived by both smokers and non-smokers to reduce initiation among non-smokers and cessation-related behaviours among smokers”*

The subsequent systematic review published in 2013 looked at 17 studies from a number of countries including Australia where plain packaging was introduced in December 2012. The studies reviewed related to both adults and children. The authors found that the evidence from these studies suggests that plain packaging would reduce appeal, enhance salience of health warnings on packs and would address the use of packaging elements that mislead smokers about product harm.

#### **Particular points of interest from the 2013 Systematic Review**

- **Eye tracking studies**

Eye-tracking methodology is where a video records the number of eye movements (saccades) towards, or fixation time on, a particular stimulus. This was used to allow researchers to explore whether plain packaging, in comparison with branded packaging, increases visual attention towards the health warnings. Results from one study<sup>3</sup> showed that analysis of variance, irrespective of smoking status, revealed more eye movements towards health warnings than branding on plain packs, but an equal number of eye movements to both regions on branded packs.

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<sup>3</sup> Maynard OM, Munafò MR and Leonards U (2013). Visual attention to health warnings on plain tobacco packaging in adolescent smokers and non-smokers. *Addiction*, **108**(2): 413-419. doi:10.1111/j.1360-0443.2012.04028.x

- **Australian studies**

An Australian study<sup>4</sup> conducted as plain packs were being introduced, compared the views of smokers still using branded packs with the views of smokers who had switched to plain packs. Those using plain packs were more likely than those still using branded packs to perceive that their cigarettes were lower quality and less satisfying than they had been a year ago.

This would seem to back up the findings of an online survey of adult<sup>5</sup> smokers in Australia conducted before the implementation of plain packs and larger front of pack pictorial warnings. The survey found that plain packs were consistently associated with lower brand appeal, and that the plainness of the pack had more of a negative impact on brand appeal than did increasing the size of pictorial warnings.

## Irish Research

In addition, The Irish Cancer Society and The Irish Heart Foundation conducted a national study<sup>6</sup> on the effects of plain packaging among 15-16 year olds. The study found that:

- Cigarette packaging that is viewed as appealing has the power to generate buzz and motivate purchase whereas packaging that is seen as 'unattractive' or 'old fashioned' is immediately rejected.
- Teens felt that the positive brand attributes of appealing packs (fun, glamour, masculinity, luxury etc.) can transfer to those who smoke them.
- For teens cigarette packaging is not just about the look and feel of the pack, it is about making the smoker 'look' and feel better about themselves and their status.

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<sup>4</sup> Wakefield M, Germain D, Durkin S, Hammond D, Goldberg M and Borland R (2012). Do larger pictorial health warnings diminish the need for plain packaging of cigarettes? *Addiction*, **107**(6): 1159-1167. doi:10.1111/j.1360-0443.2012.03774.x

<sup>5</sup> Wakefield MA, Hayes L, Durkin S and Borland R (2013b). Introduction effects of the Australian plain packaging policy on adult smokers: a cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, **3**: e003175. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2013-003175

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cancer.ie/>

- Plain packaging was immediately rejected by teens who expressed concerns about the look and feel of the packaging as well as the perceived users, both of which are completely at odds with the image teens would like to portray of themselves.
- Overall, teen smokers claimed they would quit when plain packs were introduced and non/light smokers said they were unlikely to seek or continue to trial cigarettes.

## Other Research

Finally it is worth mentioning that a study by Geoffrey T Fong, David Hammond and Sara C Hitchman (2009), which is cited by The World Health Organisation, has found evidence that Health warning labels on tobacco products constitute the most cost-effective tool for educating smokers and non-smokers alike about the health risks of tobacco use, while they also find that pictorial warnings are more successful at achieving this.<sup>7</sup> The findings in this report confirm that pictorial warnings are effective and should be introduced on all cigarette packaging. This is relevant in relation to Head 6 - Labelling Requirements for Retail Packaging of Cigarettes.

## 4. Comments on the Heads of Bill

While noting that the details under the Heads of Bill are comprehensive and refer to recommended best practice for plain packaging of cigarettes, there are a number of areas, particularly relating to Head 5 - *Physical Features of Retail Packaging of Cigarettes* where we believe the legislation could go further, to reduce ambiguities. These are detailed below, with reference to the most recent research published on plain packaging.

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<sup>7</sup> Fong, G.T. Hammond, D. and Hitchman, S.C. (2009). The impact of pictures on the effectiveness of tobacco warnings, *The World Health Organisation*, Available online at: <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/87/8/09-069575/en/index.html>.

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## Head 5 -Physical Features of Retail Packaging of Cigarettes

### Dimensions of packs

Under this head, there is no reference to standardised dimensions and size of a cigarette pack. This runs counter to some of the findings in the latest systematic review on plain packaging produced by the Centre for Tobacco Control Research at the University of Stirling (Moodie report)<sup>8</sup>. A number of studies reviewed in this report found that “slim packs” affect people’s perception of product harm. For example, the report found that respondents within a focus group in Scotland considered Superslims packs to contain less tobacco, resulting in lower harm perceptions.

Without specifications on dimensions and size, the Tobacco Industry has the opportunity to produce a variety of different packages, which will have an effect on public perceptions regarding different types of cigarettes.

### Definition of dull, drab colour

Also, in Head 5 the legislation is ambiguous on what exactly is considered “dull drab color”. Some studies in the systematic review by the Centre for Tobacco Control Research suggest that dark colours are more effective, and that “Brown” increases harm perceptions while white plain packaging decreases harm perceptions. This recent research should be analysed in prescribing a colour for the packaging.

### Variant names on packaging

Uses of variant names can influence smokers’ perceptions about the quality and healthiness of certain cigarettes. Under head 5, the legislation will allow variant names on packaging. It is unclear whether this means that a note of ‘light’ or ‘menthol’ can appear. A study<sup>9</sup> referenced in this systematic review, for example highlighted that variants differing in perceived strength while not differing in deliveries of harmful ingredients is particularly problematic, and advised that “any

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<sup>9</sup> Borland R and Savvas S (2013). The effects of variant descriptors on the potential effectiveness of plain packaging. *Tobacco Control*, published online 22nd February 2013. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050736

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packaging policy should take into account the possibility that variant descriptors can mislead smokers into making inappropriate product attributions”.

Also, the color of the ‘brand text’, ‘business or company name or variant name’ is not specified in the bill and would be prescribed in regulations. Again, we would recommend that the findings detailed in the Moodie report relating to colour and perception would inform these regulations.

## **5. Declaration of interest**

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RCPI is a registered charity and has no relationship or connection with the tobacco industry.