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LETTERS

PLAIN PACKAGING FOR CIGARETTES

Plain packaging for cigarettes improves retail transaction times

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Australia implemented generic packaging laws on 1 December 2012.¹ Similar legislation under consideration in the UK is vigorously opposed by national retail groups. Dubious tobacco industry funded studies predict tobacco transaction times will increase by 15-45 s and selection errors by 5-25%,^{2,3} costing retailers nationwide £37m (€43m; \$57.5m) a year.⁴ Conversely, independent peer reviewed research simulating 5200 tobacco transactions suggested that the switch would speed up selection times (2.92 v 3.17 s; P<0.05) and reduce selection errors (0.4% v 1.5%; P<0.05).⁵ The industry dismissed this research for having “significant methodological shortcomings” because it failed to replicate the multiple distracters in the real retail environment.⁶

In October 2012 and January 2013 we timed tobacco transactions at 100 convenience stores, newsagents, petrol stations, and supermarkets in 16 suburbs of Perth, Australia. Researchers requested one of 17 popular brands of cigarettes (systematically randomised) and, using concealed stopwatches, measured the time from their request to shopkeepers electronically scanning or placing the cigarettes on counter. Researchers then apologised for forgetting their wallets, left, and noted any selection errors. More retailers decreased than increased selection times after 1 December 2012 (Wilcoxon signed ranks test: n=61 v 39, z=-2.522; P<0.05), on average decreasing from 8.94 s (95% CI 7.63 to 10.25) to 7.39 s (6.38 to 8.40; one tailed paired samples t test: t(99)=1.964; P<0.05).

Selection errors also decreased from 3% to 2% (P not significant).

Our real life data confirm that generic tobacco packs provide modest gains in retailer efficiency. If they sincerely represent the best interests of their members and support the future health of British citizens, national retail groups should immediately withdraw their objections to generic tobacco packaging.

Competing interests: None declared.

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