

Plain packets loom but puff left in Tobacco Inc.

August 19 2012, by Amy Coopes

Health advocates declared a "brave new world of tobacco control" following Australia's historic packaging victory over the cigarette industry, but analysts warn that smoking is far from a dying trade.

[Tobacco products](#) in Australia will be sold in drab, uniform packaging with graphic [health warnings](#) from December 1 after the nation's High Court rejected a challenge to the policy, in a case being closely watched worldwide.

The [World Health Organization](#) hailed the ruling as a landmark victory for [public health](#), with director general Margaret Chan hoping for a "domino effect... with so many countries lined up to ride on Australia's coat-tails".

"With Australia's victory, public health enters a brave new world of [tobacco control](#)," Chan said following Wednesday's ruling.

The WHO estimates that six million people die every year from tobacco use and have warned that could reach eight million by 2030 without strong action.

New Zealand could be the next domino to fall -- it announced in-principle support for plain packaging in April and welcomed Australia's High Court ruling.

Britain and Canada are also considering plain pack moves and the

European Commission said Thursday it was mulling a similar proposal, with Norway and Turkey also said to be interested in such a policy.

Public health advocate and architect of Australia's policy Mike Daube said he expected that tobacco would be logo-free in Europe in the "next few years", describing Canberra's win over the cigarette firms as hugely symbolic.

"Globally, for developed countries, it's the biggest loss that tobacco companies have ever had because now other countries will follow," Daube told AFP.

"They threw everything at (the court case) not because we're little old Australia but because of the global implications. I think there will be a domino effect."

The [tobacco firms](#) insist that the fight is not over -- Australia is still facing action at the [World Trade Organization](#) over the plan from Ukraine, Dominican Republic and Honduras, and an investment treaty lawsuit in Hong Kong.

But Daube said the High Court case was the must-win for big tobacco and the rejection of their intellectual property arguments was a significant blow.

Matthew Rimmer, a property and trade expert at the Australian National University, said the cigarette industry would be "thunderstruck" by the ruling and in "deep trepidation" at its enthusiastic reception globally.

"I think that Australia's in a strong position and the tobacco industry has everything to lose," he said of the WTO and Hong Kong battles.

Rimmer said the "heyday of big tobacco" was over and though smoking

was still growing in developing countries such as India, Indonesia and China it was "only a matter of time" before anti-tobacco measures reached those places.

But Daube said "well over" 500 million people would die from tobacco use in developing countries in the next century, with people still enthusiastically taking up smoking -- particularly women.

A study of [tobacco use](#) in 16 countries that are home to 3 billion people published in the Lancet this month showed that 48.6 percent of all men and 11.3 percent of women are tobacco users, especially in poorer economies.

Russia topped the table, where 39.1 percent of all people older than 15 used tobacco, followed by Turkey (31.2 percent), Poland (30.3 percent), the Philippines (28.2 percent) and China with 28.1 percent.

By comparison, prevalence in Britain was 21.7 percent and 19.9 percent in the United States.

Daube said he was "terrified" of the future of [tobacco](#) in developing nations, where cigarette advertising and event sponsorship continue unabated, yet there is little public health education.

"I think ([tobacco companies](#)) will be very, very worried by the plain packaging decision because the pack is so important to them as a marketing tool," he said.

"But they've still just got huge markets ahead."

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