

Study analyses NZ newspapers' coverage of tobacco control issues

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University of Otago researchers' analysis of 12 months of coverage of tobacco-control issues in New Zealand newspapers has found that these media outlets use a positive tone when covering actions to reduce smoking.

The researchers found that articles were three times more likely to emphasise actions in line with tobacco control objectives rather than against them, and to report these actions with a positive rather than negative tone.

Where negative opinion was presented, it tended to be in editorials, opinion pieces and letters to the editor rather than news items, suggesting that these are the main outlets in which people can express pro-smoking views.

Their study, newly published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, examined 537 smoking-related articles published in New Zealand national and regional newspapers between 1 November 2011 and 31 October 2012. These included news items, opinion pieces or editorials, and letters to the editor.

The researchers, led by the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine's Professor Rob McGee, sought to identify the main tobacco control efforts and industry response, and degree of support expressed for various pro- and anti- tobacco control actions.

Nearly three-quarters of all articles involved six themes: "Smokefree 2025"; smokefree areas; pricing of tobacco; the [tobacco industry](#) itself; plain packaging; and smoking cessation.

"New Zealand tobacco control advocates can take heart from the positive nature and extent of coverage of tobacco control initiatives," says Professor McGee.

Even where tobacco industry viewpoints were expressed, these opinions did not go unchallenged by Public Health experts. Over half of all stories about the tobacco industry still conveyed opinions sympathetic to New Zealand's tobacco control objectives. The industry was portrayed as "big tobacco" and "tobacco bullies", who if they "really had a concern for others, would voluntarily withdraw their lethal product from the market."

However, the researchers noted that the industry was fond of repeating the supposed failure of existing tobacco control initiatives such as restrictions on point-of-sale advertising. "The important thing for advocates to remember is to state clearly and repeatedly that such actions have been shown to work," says Dr Louise Marsh, a co-author on the paper.

Professor McGee says that more than 5000 New Zealanders each year die from tobacco-related illnesses, and the Government has made a commitment to this country being Smokefree by 2025 to reduce this carnage.

"To achieve Smokefree 2025 we need to do three things, namely protect children from exposure to [tobacco smoking](#) and tobacco promotion; reduce demand and supply of tobacco through policy changes such as regulating the sale of tobacco; and support smokers to quit."

He says it is reassuring that news items largely portray [tobacco control](#) efforts to achieve Smokefree 2025 positively, and treat tobacco industry actions to fight these efforts with the cynicism they deserve.

Provided by University of Otago

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