

Research undermines tobacco industry's claims that 'plain packaging' is unfair

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(Medical Xpress)—Two research studies led by University of Otago researchers have challenged tobacco companies' claims about plain packaging.

The first study involved a survey of 418 [smokers](#) and 418 non-smokers in New Zealand and was carried out in March 2012. The study has been published in the [Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health](#).

Professor Hoek says the survey found strong support for plain packaging.

"Overall, more than two-thirds of respondents supported plain packaging. It's important to note that we undertook the survey before the current debate over plain packaging, so this estimate shows very high instinctive support for a policy that people had heard little about at the time," she says.

Professor Hoek notes that when [legislation](#) introducing smoke-free bars and restaurants was passed in 2003, surveys showed support levels of around 35%. Since then, however, support has grown significantly. Now well over 80% of New

Zealanders support smokefree bars and [restaurants](#)

"Support for many [tobacco control policies](#) increases once they have been implemented and people experience their benefits. Support for plain packaging is already very high, but we would expect it to increase even further as the issues are debated and after plain packs are introduced."

Professor Gendall says that although tobacco companies argue that packaging simply encourages brand switching, the survey found only 29% of smokers agreed that was the case, while 44% disagreed.

"These findings tell us smokers don't buy the argument that packaging encourages them to switch brands. That's because smokers know that they are extremely brand loyal and attached to their preferred brand, and very unlikely to switch to other brands," he says.

Professor Edwards says the survey also shows very low support for the [tobacco industry's](#) argument that plain packaging is unfair because it would prevent them from using their brands and logos.

"Including both smokers and non-smokers, only 20% of [respondents](#) agreed that plain packaging would be unfair, and nearly three times as many disagreed with this proposition. The public have clearly seen through [tobacco companies'](#) claims and have little sympathy for their arguments."

The second study, published recently in *BMC Public Health*, found tobacco packaging communicated very powerful brand identities to young adult smokers and non-smokers. Smokers and non-smokers alike were able to identify clear brand personalities for both familiar and unfamiliar cigarette brands.

Professor Hoek says these findings show that packaging performs the same functions as advertising.

"It communicates positive and aspirational attributes about cigarette brands and we know from other work we've conducted that young people find these attributes very attractive."

The study also included an American brand called Basic, with little in the way of brand imagery, unlike typical New Zealand tobacco brands, which feature extensive branding. Both smokers and non-smokers saw Basic as only 'budget' and 'plain'.

"Removing brand imagery eliminates positive [brand](#) personalities that attract young people to smoking. Because plain packaging is not simply plain but unattractive, we expect these negative attribute associations to increase and smoking to become even less attractive with plain packaging," says Professor Gendall.

Professor Hoek also points out that New Zealand has signed up to the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which requires the removal of all tobacco marketing, promotion and sponsorship.

"Findings from these studies show that current cigarette packaging acts as advertising and tell us that New Zealand must implement plain packaging if it is to eliminate [tobacco](#) marketing and meet its FCTC obligations.

"The studies also show exceptional public support for this measure. Plain packaging would be both a logical and popular next step towards achieving a smokefree New Zealand by 2025," she says.

Provided by University of Otago

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