

Letters to the Editor

History Repeats Itself: Tobacco Industry's Behaviour Does Not Change

Green and colleagues stress in their paper the importance of the adoption of comprehensive tobacco control policies by countries wishing to achieve maximum impact on the health of their population. [1] They mention Poland as the Central and Eastern European leader in the adoption of such a policy.

I would like to add Hungary to this list, as our country owns the second toughest tobacco policy in the region. The latest success of this policy was the introduction of a total ban of direct and indirect tobacco advertising, which puts an end to deceptive tobacco advertisements in print media (as of July 2001) and outdoor posters/billboards (as of January 2002). [2]

Along with lobbying for a policy change, advocates should keep an eye on what the industry has done in order to prevent the adoption of such laws and policies in countries with progressive tobacco control policies. The Hungarian experience also indicates that the industry uses the same strategies, tactics and arguments when trying to preclude stricter regulation. Let me give only a short comparison of the industry's conduct during the introduction of Victoria's Tobacco Act and that of the Hungarian advertising ban.

Victoria succeeded in restricting tobacco advertising as early as 1987. Hungary achieved a similar success in late 2000. In neither of the cases was the tobacco industry offered the opportunity to react and challenge the Bill. In Victoria, John Dollison, spokesperson for Philip Morris Australia, complained that the industry was not consulted. [3] Peter David, his Hungarian peer, put it as follows: 'I am very disappointed by the law, because the Hungarian Government has decided to introduce it without prior consultation'. [4] What do these declarations mean for us? Something like this: transnational tobacco companies (TTCs) have not had enough time to rev up the engines of their lobbying machineries and mobilise their allies, like those in key administrative positions within the governments and decision-makers in the parliaments, to keep the initiative from being accepted.

The industry does not change; this gives new-market countries the opportunity to learn what to expect when there is a 'danger' of the introduction of a policy intervention. However, what makes the situation in these new markets more difficult is that TTCs are generally considered sources of information 'reliable' enough by journalists and politicians not yet immune to such communication. This allows them to put their old arguments forward. The industry makes efforts to take part in solving the problem caused by itself, by its product, which causes a worldwide epidemic. This kind of 'consultation', if accepted by governments, could help the new public relations strategy of the tobacco industry aimed at restoring its corporate citizen image succeed. The tobacco industry should be kept away from the preparation of any tobacco control legislation. One of the tactics is to keep the industry uninformed. 'There had to be an element of surprise', said then Victorian Health Minister, David White, suggesting that before the Victorian Bill had been officially announced parliamentarians had already been committed to voting for it. Mihály Babák, the author of the Hungarian Bill requesting a total ban of direct and indirect tobacco advertising, also stressed the importance of having such legislation submitted in a manner which makes Big Tobacco unable to react. '... there was a tactical step to introduce it later when the

tobacco industry would not have any opportunity to remove it. The shorter the time is for external attacks the greater the success in the Parliament is. If you proceed in this way the (tobacco) lobby does not have time enough to overrun all the parliamentarians. I believe we have chosen the adequate tactics. If the submission had been introduced earlier it would not have been passed.' [5]

The tobacco industry and its tactics do not change over time. Countries just confronted with them should learn from the lobbying experiences of countries with more advanced policies. It could help to neutralise the industry's lobbying machinery. Victoria's experience is worth learning from and following.

References

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