

LETTERS

PICTORIAL CIGARETTE PACK WARNINGS HAVE IMPORTANT EFFECTS

We applaud Monárrez-Espino et al.¹ for conducting a timely systematic review on pictorial cigarette pack warnings' impact on cigarette use. We have some concerns, however, about the dissimilarity of studies included in the review. We are also concerned that readers may be unaware of other evidence that supports the efficacy of pictorial warnings.

The review's broad inclusion criteria appear to have assembled a set of studies from which it was difficult to draw insights. The review included experiments that exposed smokers to pictorial warnings briefly on computer screens as well as observational studies of warnings that appeared on smokers' actual cigarette packs. We believe data from these different types of studies should be reviewed separately; the authors themselves acknowledged that the heterogeneity made results "difficult to summarize."^{1(pel5)}

Another concern is that the studies selected for review likely underestimate the true impact of pictorial warnings. Some comparison groups exposed smokers to pictorial warnings, such as on plain packs (versus branded packs). Other studies compared those who reported low

(versus high) cognitive processing of pictorial warnings. These comparison groups were exposed to the very intervention that was being evaluated, reducing potential differences.

Given these and other limitations of Monárrez-Espino et al.'s review, we were surprised that the authors concluded that pictorial warnings are unlikely to have much impact. Indeed, readers of the review may miss the well-understood finding that pictorial warnings are more effective than text-only warnings. For example, experimental work demonstrates that pictorial warnings increase intentions to quit smoking,² a known precursor to quit attempts and smoking cessation.^{3,4} Observational studies conducted before and after pictorial warning implementation find increases in knowledge about smoking risks,⁵⁻⁷ a stated goal of international tobacco control efforts.⁸ Such studies also indicate that pictorial warnings increase cessation-related behaviors, including calling quitlines⁹ and foregoing cigarettes.¹⁰

Pictorial warnings on cigarette packs are a promising, low-cost population-level tobacco control strategy. Carefully crafted systematic reviews are crucial for synthesizing this growing literature, as are randomized controlled trials that rigorously test the impact of pictorial warnings on smoking behaviors. Although Monárrez-Espino et al.¹ have taken an important initial step, much work still remains to be done. ■

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