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Comment: Forget what the tobacco industry says



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Last month, Patrick Bashman and John Luik [argued against a ban on tobacco display advertising](#). Here, the anti-tobacco lobby gives its response.

By Amanda Sandford

There are many reasons why children take up smoking but youth exposure to tobacco marketing is a key factor. Although most forms of tobacco promotion were outlawed in the UK by the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002, the tobacco industry has continued to use its marketing muscle to lure children to its products through elaborate displays and fancy packaging. Point of sale displays also work by increasing youth perception that smoking is commonplace and that cigarettes are easily available.

The primary purpose of the display ban is therefore to protect children from tobacco marketing and reduce the uptake of smoking. But displays also encourage impulse purchasing and can weaken the resolve of recent adult quitters. Evidence from Australia shows that removing tobacco from public view reduces both impulse purchasing and the likelihood that young people will attempt to buy cigarettes.

Naturally, the tobacco industry disputes the evidence because of its need to recruit and maintain new customers. The industry has an established track record of contesting research evidence to delay regulation. Tactics include challenging the evidence in order to create uncertainty and using apparently 'independent' researchers to do its dirty work. Such allies include the Cato Institute, for

example.

So what does the experience of Canada and Iceland - where display bans have now been in force for a number of years – tell us? Firstly, that there has been a fall in youth smoking. Research has shown that the more widespread young people think smoking is, the more they want to try it. Young people greatly overestimate the proportion of adults who smoke and promotional displays help maintain those mistaken beliefs.

And in the case of Ireland, research suggests the display ban is already beginning to have an impact: one large survey found that significantly fewer young people believed that they could get away with trying to buy cigarettes since the display ban came into effect.

If tobacco display bans had no beneficial impact it's highly unlikely that other jurisdictions would follow the example of Canada and Iceland. In Canada, Saskatchewan was the pioneer and the other provinces quickly followed its lead. Just as with the public places smoking bans, success breeds success. The domino effect is now rippling through the UK, Australia and Norway, and other nations will surely follow suit.

In addition to the health benefits arising from a decline in smoking, putting tobacco products out of sight does not appear to adversely affect businesses. About 90 per cent of smokers know what brand they intend to buy even before entering a shop, so the fact that their brands are not on display is not an issue. Contrary to the misinformation put out by the tobacco industry, none of the jurisdictions that have tobacco display bans have reported economic hardship as a result of this measure.

Furthermore there is simply no evidence to support the claim that putting tobacco out of sight at the point of sale leads to an increase in illegal sales. The vast majority of retailers are law-abiding and would not be tempted to try and sell illicit products. The rise in smuggling in both Ireland and Canada predates the implementation of display bans and there is no evidence of any causal association. Tobacco smuggling is clearly a huge problem that requires a strategic response but abandoning a policy that would stop tobacco being promoted to young people is not the answer.

Amanda Sandford is the research manager at ASH (Action on Smoking and Health).

ASH is a campaigning health charity working to reduce the harm from tobacco.

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