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Tobacco: Out of Sight, out of Mind?

Putting tobacco out of sight in shops can change the attitude of young people to smoking, while not hitting retailers in the pocket, researchers at The University of Nottingham have discovered.

Academics from the University's UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies looked at the effect of the removal of tobacco displays in the Republic of Ireland, ahead of similar legislation which is due to come into force in the UK. The findings are published November 23 in the journal of TobaccoControl.

In one study the research team found that the number of teenagers who recalled tobacco displays dropped from 81 per cent to only 22 per cent, after July 1 when the displays were removed.

After they were removed, fewer young people believed smoking is widespread among their peers before this 62 per cent thought that more than one in five children their own age smoked, which fell to 46 per cent afterwards.

After displays were covered up, 38 per cent of teenagers thought the measure would make it easier for children not to smoke and 14 per cent of adults thought the law made it easier to quit smoking. The research also showed support for putting tobacco out of sight rose from 58 per cent to 66 per cent after the measure came into force.

Professor Ann McNeill, lead researcher on the project, said: "Our research shows that removing point of sale displays of tobacco has a measurable impact on how young people think about tobacco, and helps underline that they are not 'normal consumer products'. The law is popular among adults, even adult smokers".

"Removing cigarettes from sight will stop smokers from being constantly reminded of tobacco. Our research adds to the clear body of evidence that this measure should be implemented by other countries as soon as possible."

In a further study, the team showed that taking tobacco displays down did not result in any loss of income for retailers. The results should ease concerns that the measures -- which are designed to protect children from tobacco marketing and uncontrolled access to cigarettes -- will have a negative effect on business. They rebuff claims that Irish shops suffered a large drop in sales and small businesses have expressed concern about this in Ireland.

Dr Quinn, the economist at the University of Nottingham stated: "As expected we did not see any significant change in sales following the implementation of the legislation beyond the trend of falling sales that already exists. This legislation was designed to make smoking less attractive to children and young people not to make adult smokers quit. It will take some time for the impact to work its way through as the next generation of children grow up protected from large and colorful cigarette displays every time they go to buy their sweets. These findings contradict several reports coming from the retail sector that cigarette sales have rapidly decreased since the removal of promotional displays and that this decline is due to the new legislation.

Professor McNeill added: "The removal of point of sale displays is aimed at reducing the pernicious effects of tobacco advertising on children and is therefore likely to have an impact on sales over a much more protracted time period. Removing tobacco displays from sight is important to help reduce the devastating impact tobacco has on so many lives. Our research shows that retailers do not need to fear this measure designed to protect children from tobacco marketing."

Tobacco displays were removed and cigarette vending machines outlawed in Ireland on July 1 2009 and similar legislation is due to be introduced across the UK in October 2011 for large shops and October 2013 for smaller retailers.

The research projects both received funding from Cancer Research UK, the leading charity dedicated to beating cancer through research.

Jean King, Cancer Research UK's director of tobacco control, said: "This evidence from Ireland adds to that from other countries to show that businesses easily adapt when

tobacco displays are removed. Claims by the tobacco industry and groups supported by it have been to the contrary, but research-based evidence like this helps to debunk the myths".

"Removing tobacco displays in shops will help protect children from tobacco marketing. For too long the law has allowed the flashy, eye-catching walls of cigarettes to remain when most other forms of advertising have been removed. Half of all long-term smokers will be killed by tobacco so doing all we can to stop the next generation from starting to smoke is vital."