ROLE OF PICTORIAL HEALTH WARNING LABELS (HWLs) IN CONTROLLING & PREVENTING TOBACCO HABITS – A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Product packaging is a key part of making the product’s use appealing; however, this is not the case for tobacco. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) calls for the implementation of large pictorial warnings on tobacco products.¹ Regulatory agencies can use tobacco product packaging to communicate tobacco’s health risks to consumers because of the unparalleled reach of pictorial warnings among smokers.² As pictorial health warning labels have proliferated globally, so has research on their impact and effectiveness.³ However, little attempt has been made to systematically review the role of pictorial health warning labels (HWLs) in controlling and prevention of tobacco habits.

AIM

To assess whether pictorial health warning labels (HWLs) are an effective strategy for tobacco control.

OBJECTIVES

• To find out whether pictorial health warning labels (HWLs) increase knowledge regarding the health effects of tobacco.
• To find the effect of pictorial HWL on intentions to quit (evidence on controlling and prevention).
• To observe the impact of various HWL themes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

• We used a comprehensive search strategy to locate studies relevant to this review. The search strategy involved 3 steps:
  1. First we searched electronic databases like PubMed, Google Scholar and the Cochrane Library with keywords like “health warning labels and tobacco” and “pictorial warning and tobacco” for articles published in English in the past 5 years.
  2. Second we examined the reference sections of 2 narrative reviews of cigarette packaging warnings.
  3. Third, we examined the reference lists of the final set of articles in our review.
• We included all reports that came up in our search, i.e. peer reviewed journal articles.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Three authors independently assessed all studies for inclusion criteria and for study quality. One author extracted the data, and 2 reviewers independently examined all the articles only if both reviewers independently determined that the article was irrelevant.

RESULTS

The 13 studies were conducted in 8 countries; most were conducted (3) in the USA followed by 2 each in Brazil, India, and Iran, and 1 each in Malaysia, Taiwan, Jordan and the UK. These studies were published between 2010 and 2015. Studies included smokers & young adults with ages ranging from 14 to 57 years. Study samples ranged from 20 - 1731.

Studies used different warnings, ranging from text, existing images, newer images and different percentages of area covered on the cigarette package. More than 10 outcome measures were studied. We identified 4 outcome measures in at least 2 studies.

DISCUSSION

• The methodological heterogeneity of the studies was so large that articles could seldom be compared with one another. This variance in the exposure measurement, study design and population, statistical analysis and adjustments was also very large. Studies reported no clear-cut criteria for being smokers. Study quality was generally low with the majority of studies being unable to provide any association measures.

This systematic review shows that evidence concerning the effect of pictorial HWLs on smoking behavior is inconclusive. Moreover, the transition of an intention to quit smoking into actual and sustained behavioral change as an outcome has not been assessed.

Some studies assessed pictorial HWLs using cognitive measures and emotional reaction (i.e. fear, pleasantness, attraction etc.)¹³ based on different natures of warnings, which showed mixed result; however, they were not comparable, making the findings questionable.⁴⁻⁴⁷

Plain tobacco packaging are the future; but whether it will reduce the demand for smoking needs to be investigated.⁴⁻⁴⁷

It can be reported that HWLs are well noticed and motivate individuals to quit, but the actual quitting cannot be justified from this review. The use of industrial data could have been helpful in depicting the change in tobacco consumption following label implementation. Nevertheless these findings support that these variables can have a great impact on the behaviour to change model.

CONCLUSION

Pictorial warning have a good salience and are also effective in motivating patients to quit; however, there are limited studies providing clear evidence on the prevention of tobacco habits. Future studies are required to assess the long term effects on smoking behaviour, reducing smoking initiation, the impact of social & cultural norms and health beliefs in relation to pictorial health warning labels.

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