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Pictorial warnings on tobacco packs only from December 1

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Buckling Under Pressure From Tobacco Lobby, Govt Defers Decision Again

Kounteya Sinha | TNN

New Delhi: Gory pictorial warnings will have to wait six more months before they can appear on tobacco packs. Buckling under pressure from the powerful tobacco lobby, the health ministry has decided to defer gory warnings on cigarette and tobacco packs till December 1.

The ministry's earlier public notification made on March 5 had announced that it was mandatory for all such packs to carry the photograph of a rotting cancer-stricken mouth from June 1. However, the ministry officials confirmed to TOI on Monday that the order has been deferred. Till December 1, the present warnings, considered too soft and counter-productive, will continue.

Pictorial warnings were enforced on May 31, 2009 after the intervention of the Supreme Court. The rules mandate that the pictorial warnings should be rotated every 12 months.

"But the ministry, forced by the tobacco lobby, has decided to go ahead with the soft warnings till December, breaking rules," an official said.



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Sources say the tobacco industry claimed that it was too cost-intensive to use gory images in their packaging. However, activists say the announcement was made by the ministry in March which gave the indus-

try ample time.

Gory pictorial warnings are used in several countries including Australia, Belgium, Chile and Hong Kong to deter people from smoking. Brazil changes the pictures every five months.

"The new pictorial warning was finalised after field testing conducted by Voluntary Health Association of India and Healis in seven states on request of the ministry in which 98% respondents chose the picture of the cancer-ridden mouth as a replacement for the present day picture of a lung and scorpion. They said this will repulse tobacco users, in turn helping them to quit smoking or chewing tobacco," an official said.

The warning was to cover 40% of the tobacco pack in all local languages with the message 'Tobacco Kills' and 'Tobacco Causes Cancer'.

"Pictures with shock value will make smokers quit. Earlier warnings were feelgood and tremendously mild. While one depicted a scorpion, the other two were an X-ray plate of a TB patient's chest and a photograph of a cigarette stub with a cross-sign over it,"

a ministry official said. "The warnings can't be soft. It has to convey the ills of tobacco smoking and chewing. International experience has taught us that warnings need to be big, scary and colourful. Only then do they catch the eye and deter people. In India, only 2% smokers quit," he added.

Presently, 9 lakh people, nearly 2,200 per day, die every year in India due to tobacco-related diseases. About 250 million people in India use tobacco products like gutka, cigarettes and bidis. Over 16% are cigarette smokers and 44% smoke bidis. The health ministry estimates that 40% of India's health problems stem from tobacco use.

Recently, an economic study said that a simple rise in excise tax of bidis and cigarettes could stop people from smoking. According to the report by leading Indian, American and Canadian economists, if India increased its tax rate on bidis from Rs 14 to Rs 98 per 1,000 sticks (from 9% to 40% of retail price) and on cigarettes from Rs 659 to Rs 3,691 per 1,000 sticks (from 38% to 78% of retail price), 18.9 million lives will be saved among Indians alive today.