

Tuesday, May 05, 2009

Anti-tobacco campaigners cry foul over dilution of health warnings

Publication: [The Hindu Business Line](#), Edition: Kolkata, Journalist: P.T.Jyothi Datta & Purvita Chatterjee, Page No: 9, Location: Bottom-Left, Width(cms): 17, Height(cms): 15, Size(sq.cms): 255

Anti-tobacco campaigners cry foul over dilution of health warnings

Violation of Election Commission's code of conduct alleged

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Mumbai, May 4 The smoke just doesn't seem to clear over the pictorial health warnings to be carried on tobacco products from May 31. In a weekend development, the Centre issued a notification stating that tobacco products carry health warnings covering 40 per cent of the principal display area of the front panel of tobacco products.

And this has the tobacco control community, including former Union Health Minister Dr Anbumani Ramadoss crying foul, as the notification not just dilutes the health warning, but also violates the Election Commission's code of conduct, they say. The development comes even as a case filed by an arm of the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) against the dilution of pictorial warnings, is slated to come up before the Supreme Court on Tuesday.

It had been earlier decided that tobacco products would

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carry pictorial warnings on both sides of their packs, covering 40 per cent of the principal display area. The warning, watered down from what anti-tobacco advocates were pushing for, included a picture of a scorpion indicating cancer and a diseased lung.

Any dilution on pictorial warnings detracts from the country's commitment to protect people from tobacco, said reputed cardiologist Dr K. Srinath Reddy, President of Public Health Foundation of India. In fact, during the weekend, Dr Ramadoss alleged that the minutes of a Group of Ministers (GoM) meeting on pictorial warnings had been altered. In the past too, the former health minister has alleged that pro-tobacco lobbies were at work.

DILUTION

The GoM was counting tobacco votes over tobacco deaths, said a note from the Advocacy Forum for Tobacco Control (AFTC), comprising several anti-tobacco networks. Since its constitution in early 2007, the GoM has already delayed the implementation of the pictorial warnings for two years and during this time diluted stronger warnings, reduced size of the warnings from 50 per cent of the principal display area to 40 per cent, besides exempting large packs from the purview of the packaging labelling rules.

The decision of the GoM, headed by Mr Pranab Mukherjee, to make it mandatory to carry warnings on only one side of the pack was a "death blow", said AFTC.

Scaling the warnings down is a violation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, to which India is a signatory, observed Dr P.C. Gupta, Director, Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health. The Government should not have put out a new notification when there was an old one in place. It is a policy development and violates the election code, he added.

INDUSTRY BRACES

Meanwhile, a Godfrey Phillips official said, that the entire brand-management team would have to get into the act of changing packs now. New cylinders would be required for changed packaging, which is expensive and multiple brands will need multiple cylinders.

Mr Sudhdee Ranjan of GTC (Golden Tobacco Company) observed that the industry would be inconvenienced in changing the packaging, even as it reeled under several taxes.