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New images to replace pictorial warnings on tobacco packs

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New images to replace pictorial warnings on tobacco packs

Ramya Kannan

CHENNAI Responding to complaints that pictorial warnings on tobacco packs are ineffective, the Union Ministry of Health has decided to change the images.

A senior official in the Ministry said the process had been kick-started. The changes are being considered specifically because of insistent pressure from civil society organisations that the current images of a scorpion, diseased lungs and X-ray of the lungs are mild and have not served their purpose of deterrence.

The official said the mild pictures were chosen to usher in the concept of pictorial warnings. The government was aware of the pressing demand to change them.

It would be ready with the images at least three months ahead of June, in order to prepare the industry, according to official sources. The government is mandated to change the images every year, as per the regulations of the Framework Convention on Tobacco

Control. The current law to display images to occupy 40 per cent of the space on packs came into effect on May 31, 2009.

Pictures suggested to the Ministry include powerful ones used in other countries, including South America, and will be examined. The images will be field-tested before the Ministry approves a fresh set of pictorial warnings.

Three studies conducted by the Healis-Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health in Mumbai recently showed there were serious inadequacies in the implementation of the pictorial warning criteria and that the current warnings were not properly understood by people. P.C. Gupta, director of the institute, said: "The issue of pictorial warnings on tobacco products has been a long-running battle... The dilution of the pictorial warnings themselves... indicates there has been a clear lack of commitment from the government in implementing warnings."

The study showed a gross lack of fulfilment of the in-

tended purpose of the warnings. For instance, the scorpion symbol was interpreted by many as a new brand of tobacco product, a zodiac sign and a decoration on the pack. When shown the image of the diseased lung, respondents saw a butterfly and a burnt leaf. Over 25 per cent of the 615 respondents in Mumbai said these pictorial warnings definitely did not seem a deterrent.

"Changing the images used on tobacco packs is essential," says E. Vidhubala of the Tobacco Cessation Centre, Cancer Institute, here. The current images are unable to invoke any direct co-relation to the harmful effects of tobacco use.

Studies from other parts of the world have shown that in countries where "serious" picture-based warnings were used, they have worked well as deterrents. For instance, she says, in a study in Singapore, 28 per cent of smokers said they had started smoking fewer cigarettes as a result of the warning.