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Pictorial warnings on tobacco products ineffective! Changes vitally needed

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Bureau

Inadequacies in the implementation of pictorial warnings law - Current pictorial warnings are largely ineffective and not properly understood by the common people

The pictorial warnings mandated as per the 31st May 2009 rule on all tobacco products, are not only violating the law but also remain largely ineffective, as per the study results announced by Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health.

The results were an outcome of three studies: One, study that intended to track the level of implementation of the pack warnings law; Two, focus group discussions on the pack warnings and three, a field research study based on focus group discussions. These results highlighted important facts that the implementation of the warning labels is poor, most of the packages do not meet the mandated 40% coverage area and some packages barely covered almost only 10% of the principle display area. The warnings are mostly in English and do not serve the purpose and are rather confusing; one picture of X ray lung is not understood by almost anybody and the warnings are associated very unscientifically.

Speaking on this issue, **Dr.P.C.Gupta, Director, Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health**, said "The issue of pictorial warnings on tobacco products has been a long running battle. Despite several changes in the supposed date of implementation - which was spread over an inexcusably long period of more than two years - and the dilution of the pictorial warnings themselves, in terms of the sample warnings presented to the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare versus the extremely diluted warnings put in effect, there has been a clear lack of commitment from the government in implementing warnings. The results of these studies simply prove the point that these warnings are not effective, and layperson interprets the warnings in their own way, without actually interpreting them for what they signify - which is the massive threat to health that tobacco use implies."

Dr. Pankaj Chaturvedi, Associate Professor of Head and Neck Surgery, Tata Memorial Hospital, added, "I treat many patients suffering from cancers of lung, throat, mouth, etc. caused mainly due to tobacco use. Many of my patients have told me that had they ever realized how deadly tobacco really is, they would have never taken up the habit. We need to inform people about the resultant health hazards of tobacco in time and save many lives and sufferings, the warnings on the tobacco packages should be made more strong and effective".

About the study:

Packages were purchased from different parts of Mumbai in June 2009, the first month of the implementation of the pictorial warnings rule, and these warnings were then analyzed for compliance as per the 31st May 2009 notification. The results of the study indicate that the new warnings, are violating the mandated law requirement of 40% coverage area of principle surface especially on smokeless tobacco products and the warnings being mostly in English,

For the focus group study, the discussions were carried out over a period of two months starting from July 2009. The participants were selected from different parts of Mumbai. The focus group discussions data have been scientifically analyzed by public health experts. A field survey based carried out in the month of September 2009 further confirmed the findings of the focus group discussions.

India is currently in the throes of a growing tobacco epidemic, and any and all steps required ensuring the damage is limited need to be taken in a proper, structured and effective manner at the earliest possible.

Notes to Editor

About Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health:

Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health is an organization dedicated to improving public health in India and other developing countries. Established on August 1, 2004 it is a leader in quality research in India. It conducts research specific to India's unique social and cultural settings to help assess the health situation and to help guide health services and programs. It co-hosted the 14th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in collaboration with agencies of high repute during March 8-12, 2009. It has also played an instrumental role in fostering advocacy development and has actively engaged the media on health related issues. Healis works in collaboration with leading National and International Health and Research organizations.