Use of tobacco products is the leading preventable cause of death worldwide. Findings of Global Adult Tobacco Survey, 2010, suggest that more than one-third of adults in India use tobacco in some form or the other. According to National Family Health Survey III, more than half of men in India use one or more forms of tobacco. Additionally, the COTPA (Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products [Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution] Act), 2003, prohibits both direct and indirect advertisement of tobacco products in the country. There is total ban on sponsoring of any sport and cultural events by cigarette and other tobacco product companies. No trademark or brand name of cigarettes or any tobacco product can be promoted in exchange for sponsorship, gift, prize, or scholarship. Sale of tobacco products to minors is prohibited and the burden of proof is on the seller. The sale of the tobacco products is prohibited within a radius of 100 yards of any educational institution. Punishment has been prescribed in the act for violation of these provisions.

Packaging regulations have become an integral component of global tobacco control policy in many countries. These packaging restrictions include use of pictorial warning against smoking. Article 11 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires its signatories to implement large, rotating health warnings. Following ratification of FCTC in 2005, a notification was issued in 2006 on use of specific pictures to be used by tobacco companies within 7 months. However, this deadline got extended seven times and the policy decision could not be implemented till April 1, 2015.

Need to make policy decisions with regard to psychoactive substances in light of scientific evidence has been highlighted recently. Health warning labels on tobacco products have been described as “the most cost-effective tool for educating smokers and nonsmokers alike about the health risks of tobacco use”. Pictorial warnings have been found to be effective in deterring smoking, especially among the young. Use of pictorial warnings is of special relevance in countries with low literacy rates. Additionally it is not associated with any adverse consequences. Also government and general public do not incur any financial cost for the same. Evidence also supports use of large health warnings as it has been documented that larger health warnings covering more of the front of the pack are more effective than smaller warnings. Psychological theories support better recall of larger warnings.

The current proposed size of pictorial warnings on cigarette packs is going to be largest in the world and shall put India straightway at number one spot in the Canadian Cancer Society list. The recent policy review is a welcome move and step in the right direction. However, the job is half done. Ensuring effective implementation of this policy decision could be challenging. The proposed amendment to the existing rules has to go through the legislative and bureaucratic process. Subsequent to its enactment the implementation rests with the regulatory authorities. The experiences from the past call for a more proactive approach. Following ratification of FCTC in 2005, a notification was issued in 2006 on use of specific pictures to be used by tobacco companies within 7 months. However, this deadline got extended seven times and the policy decision could not be implemented till 2009. It must be ensured that the possible road blocks in implementation of this recent policy decision are addressed swiftly and effectively.
Plain packaging has been identified as a “new frontier” for tobacco control. In December 2012, a parliamentarian introduced a private member’s bill on plain packaging of cigarettes and other tobacco products, which has not been promulgated yet. Also the High Court of Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest Indian states, has asked Government of India to consider adopting plain packaging for cigarettes and other tobacco products on the lines of Australian government. Key challenge would be to fight off tobacco industry lobbying and bureaucratic hurdles.

The decision to increase the size of pictorial warning on cigarette packages in India is a policy decision supported by scientific evidence. The next challenge will be to implement it in letter and spirit.

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