

How much more study on cigarette warnings?

Gov't won't explain delay in putting Barb Tarbox's image on packages

BY DAVID STAPLES, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM OCTOBER 22, 2010



The Journal's David Staples

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Stephen Harper's Conservative government refuses to give an honest, reasonable explanation about why it's refusing to put new health warnings on cigarette packages.

In the absence of a sensible explanation, what are we to think? That Harper and his government have caved in to pressure from tobacco companies to stop these new warnings? That's how it looks.

These new warnings certainly weren't going to please Big Tobacco. For instance, the warnings were going to be much larger, taking up 75 per cent of the cigarette package. They were also going to be more disturbing than ever, including images of cancer-ravaged, anti-smoking crusader Barb Tarbox dying in palliative care.

It was a carefully planned public health campaign, designed for maximum impact. It was also a long time coming -- several years too long.

But after 10 years without any new warnings on packages, after research had found the old warnings were increasingly stale and ineffective, after six years of Health Canada studying new warnings, after every province and territory agreeing that new warnings were the way to go, after the new warnings had been studied and focus-grouped to death, after thousands of hours of work by bureaucrats and who knows how many millions spent, the new warnings were expected to come out on cigarette packs early in 2011.

Not anymore.

Last month, federal officials privately told their provincial counterparts the plan was off. There's since been some backtracking by Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq's department. But on Wednesday, Health Canada issued the following: "Health Canada continues to examine the renewal of health warning messages on tobacco packaging but is not ready to move forward at this time."

More study needed? That sounds like bureaucratese for a death sentence to me.

I should say that my determination to see this project proceed is partly personal. Journal photographer Greg Southam and I closely followed

Tarbox, 41, during the final months of her life.

She was an inspirational but controversial figure. She continued to smoke, right to her deathbed, even as she preached the dangers of smoking to more than 50,000 teenagers across Canada. Some saw her as a hypocrite. I saw her as a hopeless addict with a score to settle against her own stupid and fatal 30-year habit. I also believed that the images of her smoking in palliative care -- needing her friends to hold up the cigarette to her mouth so she could take her final puffs -- would be as powerful an anti-smoking message as the world had ever seen.

Tarbox believed the same and wanted those images captured, no matter how embarrassing it was for her to be seen in that state. It was her final wish for her campaign that those images go onto cigarette packages. And it is well past the time that that should have happened.

What is the holdup?

In its response to my questions, Aglukkaq's department said: "Health Canada continues to review available research, including international best practices, on health-warning messages. ... The impact and possible effectiveness of any new messages on the smoking behaviour of Canadians needs to be determined before new messages are considered."

More research? What, 60 focus groups not enough?

Two years ago, Health Canada tested 49 new health warnings for possible placement on cigarette packages, including two with photographs of an emaciated Tarbox on her deathbed. Sixty focus groups of smokers in Toronto, Calgary and Montreal rated the deathbed image as having the highest impact on them, saying it was far more clear and powerful than most anti-smoking warnings. The prospect of early death struck a chord with smokers of all ages, Decima reported.

"In both Montreal and Toronto, people questioned whether people looked really that horrible when dying of cancer and whether this was exaggerated or a worst-case scenario. When this was disputed by other participants who had seen the effects of cancer first-hand, the credibility was no longer questioned."

Harper's political opponents are thinking the worst about the government's stall tactics. They charge that the new warnings have been shelved because big tobacco companies went to work on Health Canada officials. "I can't think of any other answer," says New Democrat health critic Megan Leslie.

"We have so much evidence that this (warnings on packages) works.

"This is putting shareholders above the health of Canadians ... It's not in the best interest of the public."

Now, I'm not given to accept most of what Harper's political critics say about his government, but in this case I see no reason to disbelieve the critique. The delay on the launch of these warnings is inexplicable and indefensible. It must be overturned.

I'll leave the last word to Geoffrey Fong, a psychology professor at the University of Waterloo and an international expert on smoking cessation laws and media campaigns: "I don't have any personal knowledge of how strong the tobacco lobby is ... There are obviously some internal debates or problems or issues that are going on (at Health Canada). From a standpoint of public health, there isn't any reason why we shouldn't have new warning labels. There's a very strong need."

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