

Health warnings on tobacco packaging in Italy: do they describe all possible smoking-related conditions?

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Abstract

This report aims to evaluate the adherence between the health warnings on tobacco products in Italy and the smoking-related conditions known in the scientific literature. The Legislative Decree 2003 and 2012 established the general and the additional warnings on tobacco packaging. Regarding the smoking-related conditions, the health damages presented in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report are reported. Also a narrative review was performed.

Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, adverse reproductive outcomes and childhood neurobehavioral disorders are well reported in the textual health warning. Also there is at least one message indicating that the exposure of secondhand smoke is harmful. Conversely, several smoking-related cancers and other adverse health effects (diabetes, hip fractures, low bone density in postmenopausal women, rheumatoid arthritis, mental decline, acne and allergy, etc) are not considered.

The health warnings represent an important mean for communicating that may change smokers' attitudes and behaviours, therefore, it's important to implement them, also considering the introduction of graphical warnings, to maintain their effectiveness over time.

Keywords: Smoking-related conditions, tobacco, health warnings, Italy

1. Introduction

Worldwide tobacco use causes about 6 million of deaths and costs hundreds of billions of dollars of economic damage each year. If current trends continue, it will cause more than 8 million deaths annually by 2030 [1]. The burning of tobacco produces the complex chemical mixture of more than 7,000 compounds that cause a wide range of medical conditions and premature deaths [2].

Health warnings on tobacco products represent a significant field of tobacco control policy. Health warnings on tobacco packages is as an important medium for communicating the tobacco-related risks to smokers. The impact of health warning varies: large health warnings on the face of packages represent a good source of health information for smokers and non-smokers. In particular, comprehensive warnings are effective among youth and could prevent smoking initiation. Also

pictorial warning are more effective [3]. Also health warning could have a protective effect on recently quit smoker (< 1 year ago) to stay quit [4].

In Italy, Legislative Decree n. 184, June 24th, 2003, transposing the European Directive 2001/37/CE, established that each tobacco packaging should have a main warning on the most visible surface of the package and an additional warning on the second surface most visible [5]. In 2012, the Legislative Decree on October 25th, 2012, introduced new additional textual warnings [6]. Tobacco products and cigarettes not in compliance with this last Decree can be released for consumption until 28th March, 2016, and marketed until March 28th, 2018, in accordance with Legislative Decree on April 2nd, 2014 [7].

The aim of the study was to evaluate the correspondence between the actual health Italian warnings and the smoking-related diseases or symptoms.

Table 1. Health warning on tobacco products in Italy.

Legislative Decree n. 184, 24 June 2003
Implementation of Directive 2001/37/EC concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco products.
General warnings (on the most visible surface of the unit packet):
1. Smoking kills
2. Smoking seriously harms you and others around you
Additional warnings (on the other most visible surface of the unit packet):
1. Smoking clogs the arteries and causes heart attacks and strokes.
2. Smoking causes fatal lung cancer.
3. Smoking when pregnant harms your baby.
4. Protect children: don't make them breathe your smoke.
5. Your doctor or your pharmacist can help you stop smoking.
6. Smoking is highly addictive, don't start.
7. Stopping smoking reduces the risk of fatal heart and lung diseases.
8. Smoking causes ageing of the skin.

Legislative Decree 25 October 2012
Transposition of the Directive 2012/9/UE of the Commission on the new health warnings on tobacco products.
Additional warnings (on the other most visible surface of the unit packet):
1. Smoking causes 9 out of 10 lung cancers
2. Smoking causes mouth and throat cancer
3. Smoking damages your lungs
4. Smoking causes heart attacks
5. Smoking causes strokes and disability
6. Smoking clogs your arteries
7. Smoking increases the risk of blindness
8. Smoking damages your teeth and gums
9. Smoking can kill your unborn child
10. Your smoke harms your children, family and friends
11. Smokers' children are more likely to start smoking
12. Quit smoking – stay alive for those close to you (to complete, in rotation, with the insertion of the following reference: "Green phone against smoking: 800 554088 – National Institute of Health – Ministry of Health: www.salute.gov.it ")
13. Smoking reduces fertility
14. Smoking increases the risk of impotence

2. Material and Methods

The study is a review of the health warnings on tobacco packaging according to the Legislative Decree 2003 and 2012 [5,6,7] in Italy (Table 1).

The health warnings were divided in general ("Smoking kills" and "Smoking seriously harms you and others around you") and additional.

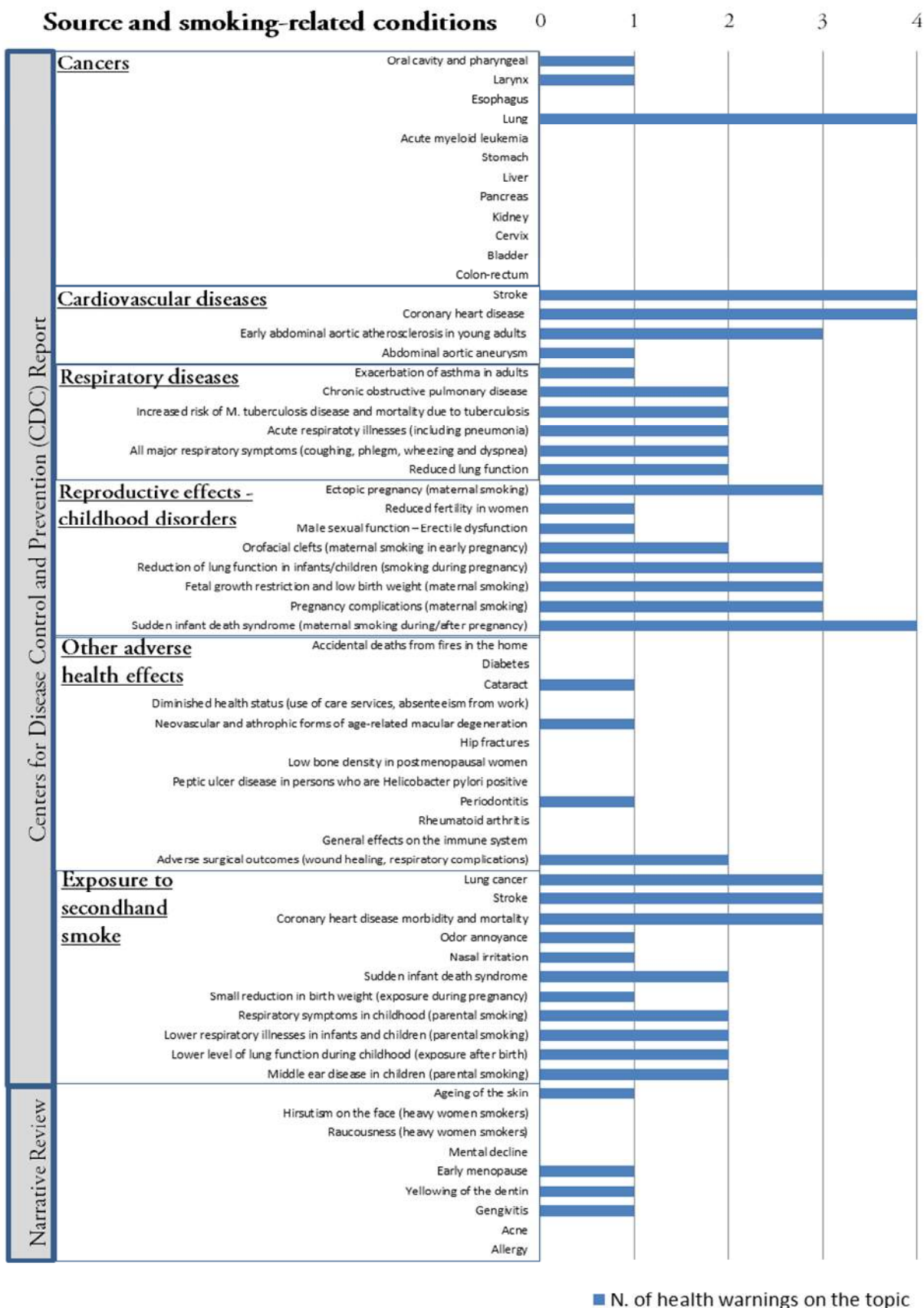
In this review only the additional health warnings concerning specific smoking-related diseases or symptoms are included. The excluded messages were: "Your doctor or your pharmacist can help you stop smoking", "Smoking is highly addictive, don't start", "Smokers' children are more likely to start smoking" and "Quit smoking – stay alive for those close to you".

The smoking-related diseases included in the study were presented in Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC) report as conditions in which the evidence is sufficient to establish a causal relationship between smoking and increased risk of these conditions [8,9]. The Italian Minister of Health website and reports [10], articles from scientific literature [11,12] and a book published on this topic [13] were consulted to assess other possible smoking-related pathologies. Adverse effects are divided in areas according to the CDC report and illustrated in a graph bar.

3. Results

A total of 18 additional health warnings are considered in this report. The Figure 1 shows the number of warnings now present on cigarette packages in Italy on each specific smoking-related health condition.



■ N. of health warnings on the topic

Figure 1. Distribution of the smoking-related conditions in the health tobacco warnings in Italy.

The warnings cover all areas of smoking effects. The major diseases reported in the messages concerning lung cancer, stroke, coronary heart disease and sudden infant death syndrome (N=4). Regarding adverse reproductive outcomes or childhood neurobehavioral disorders, there is at least a warning about the consequences of smoking on reproductive system in women and men and about the effect of maternal smoking during and after the pregnancy.

As far as the effects of the exposure to secondhand smoke are concerned, there is at least one message indicating that this exposure is harmful.

Nevertheless, important gaps are presents. In particular, the lack of warnings is evident about several types of cancers, i.e. esophagus, kidney, liver, bladder, colon rectum, cervix and acute myeloid leukemia.

Moreover, there is no mention in the warnings of the increased risks of several issues, such as accidental deaths from fires in the home, use of care services, absenteeism from work, diabetes, hip fractures, low bone density in postmenopausal women, peptic ulcer disease in persons who are *Helicobacter pylori* positive, rheumatoid arthritis, hirsutism on the face and raucousness for heavy women smokers, mental decline, acne, allergy and general effects on the immune system.

4. Discussion

This report found that the health warning labels in Italy are mainly focused on smoking-related respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, the adverse reproductive outcomes and childhood neurobehavioral disorders.

In particular, it is interesting to underline that several smoking-related cancers and other important adverse health effects are not reported in the warning labels.

The health warnings cannot be considered a static intervention. On the other hand, they must be revised or updated to maintain their effectiveness over time. In

relation to the message content, the severity should be considered from a public health perspective, that is the number of lives attributable to the disease, but also from the individual's perspective, that is related to the individual consequences on the quality of life or on the physical appearance [14].

In Europe, a study provides to evaluate the effectiveness of the text health warnings in four Member States. The impact varies across the countries, in particular it's higher where there is more comprehensive tobacco control programmes and among smokers with lowest socioeconomic status, who had made a quit attempt in the past year and smokers who smoked fewer cigarettes per day. In particular, the impact was highest in France, lower in the UK, and lowest in Germany and the Netherlands [15].

In Italy, the introduction of health warnings on cigarette packages produced some positive effects, informing on tobacco effects, reducing the amount of daily smoking and attempting to quit [16].

Furthermore, pictorial warnings on cigarette packages seem to be rated as effective by Italian smokers, in particular, by female and younger smokers and by those who want to quit smoking [17].

This paper presents several limits. First of all, it regards to the narrative character of this report. As a matter of fact, a systematic review of the smoking-related conditions was not carried out. The second limit is concerning the subjective inclusion of a warning in a pathology group.

Nevertheless, the review underlines that there is a gap between the actual health warnings in Italy and the main smoking-related conditions. Therefore, it may be necessary to implement the messages about the adverse effects of smoking on health, also considering the introduction of graphical warnings, because the warnings labels represents an important mean for communicating and have an impact on smokers' attitudes and behaviours.

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