Strong graphic health warnings now compulsory on tobacco packaging in Myanmar

Edinburgh, 29 February 2016 – The health risks of tobacco use must now be graphically displayed across 75 percent of the front and back of all tobacco packages in Myanmar, after new legislation was announced by the Ministry of Health (MoH) today. The new packaging will feature images of the health consequences on tobacco use across 50 percent of the surface area, and text warnings in local language across 25 percent. Old packaging will be illegal from 1 September 2016.

The ruling follows a public opinion poll conducted by the MoH in 2014 to test the efficacy of graphic warnings for reducing tobacco use, as opposed to text only. Less than 35 percent of respondents found text warnings to be effective, but more than 80 percent found graphic health warnings to be a high impact deterrent.

‘The new rules on pictorial health warnings will directly prevent young people using cigarettes and other tobacco products. It will also build public awareness about the dangers of second-hand smoke,’ said Dr Than Aung, Minister of Health for Myanmar. ‘We believe that pictorial health warnings will significantly reduce the burden of health care costs imposed by tobacco use, for both the government and general public. This government is committed to building an effective tobacco control programme in coordination and collaboration with non-governmental partners.’

Harrowing images of the health harms caused by tobacco use are proven to encourage users to quit and to discourage non-users from taking up the habit. The World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) includes graphic health warnings as a key measure for reducing tobacco use. It is particularly important for conveying life-saving public health messages to populations with low literacy rates.

‘Bold illustration of the health consequences of tobacco use on packaging is a proven and powerful deterrent at point of use. We congratulate the government of Myanmar on this strong new ruling to protect public health,’ said Ehsan Latif, Director of The Union’s Department of Tobacco Control. ‘Evidence from countries like Australia shows just how profound the effects of reforming tobacco packaging can be as part of a comprehensive tobacco control programme. There, where they now have plain packaging, the number of 18 – 24-year-old’s who have never smoked has increased by more than 20 percent in just over a decade.’
Myanmar signed the WHO FCTC – the only legally binding international health treaty – in 2003, and adopted national legislation to reduce tobacco use in 2006. Tobacco use remains a major public health issue in Myanmar. Almost 44 percent of adult males smoke, while more than 62 percent use smokeless tobacco. Amongst women, 8 percent smoke and over 24 percent use smokeless tobacco.

‘These new rules on graphic health warnings will motivate tobacco users to quit, provide hard-hitting messages to young people to prevent uptake, and build a wider awareness about danger of tobacco use among Myanmar population’, said Dr Tara Singh Bam, Regional Advisor, The Union Asia Pacific. ‘Larger graphic health warnings, covering 90 percent of the packet surface were found to be effective in Nepal, where 58 percent of smokers are thinking of quitting, and 55 percent have cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke.’

The Union has been working with the health ministry in Myanmar since 2012 to support the national tobacco control programme through capacity building and technical assistance on: labelling and packaging, tax increases, ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship and smokefree laws. A delegation of ministers and diplomats visited the Department of Tobacco Control’s Edinburgh headquarters in 2015 to discuss strategies for developing their tobacco control policies and to witness Scotland’s progressive work in this area of public health.

Find out more about graphic health warnings here.

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