

trancesolutions

the con of mild cigarettes

Mild cigarettes, a healthier choice?

Next time you hear a smoker ask a shopkeeper for the "mild" brand, reflect on what that smoker thinks he or she is getting. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has been pondering this for nearly four years and has now told the Government there is a strong case that the decades-long practice of the tobacco industry labeling products "mild" and "light" is seriously misleading.

So-called light cigarettes are largely a result of the industry successfully selling the idea that machine-testing of tar and nicotine is a reliable basis for consumers to differentiate brands.

The problem is that people do not smoke like machines. Smoke-testing machines do not get addicted to nicotine and so, unlike humans, do not take more and deeper puffs, smoke light cigarettes down further, or smoke more cigarettes to get the nicotine that their brain cries out for hundreds of times a day.

So what is a light cigarette? Basically, it's much the same as a regular cigarette except for one vital little matter that the industry fails to tell its customers. Mild and light cigarettes are perforated with microscopically small air holes just in front of the filter.

When the mouth of the smoking machine grips the cigarette, air rushes in through the holes and dilutes the smoke, causing lower tar and nicotine readings. Smokers don't know about the holes, but their brains do.

They quickly learn to compensate by either smoking more, deeper or by unconsciously blocking some of the holes with their lips and fingers, giving them an intake that machine-testing would never record. This is bad news for the health of smokers who buy these products and, to date, good news for companies which saw light cigarettes as a life-raft, for them, which they could throw to desperate consumers thinking of quitting.

Evidence presented to the commission by health groups was undeniable. Much of it came from the industry's internal documents. These documents show the industry nakedly exploited smokers' health concerns.

As far back as 1983 British American Tobacco (BAT) knew Australian "smokers of the ultra low tar brands are very conscious of the smoking and health controversy, but that smokers of 6-9 mg tar brands split between those wanting mildness per se and those wanting smoker reassurance".

In 1994 BAT knew that 16 per cent of smokers in Australia believed "lights would be safer for health reasons" with a "key finding" that lights were "perceived as a clever psychological ruse intimating that the smoker was indulging in a low tar content cigarette, an innocuous cigarette".

Philip Morris which, after a corporate makeover, calls itself Altria, owes most of its \$US131 billion (\$170 billion) global value to its cigarette division. It also owns Kraft, maker of Vegemite and peanut butter, one version of which is labelled light.

Altria's Kraft division knows that "light" means "healthier". But down the corporate corridor in the tobacco division, executives want to tell us that it doesn't mean that at all. It means "light taste", and has nothing to do with promoting a health message.

The ACCC's call has come as no surprise to the local industry, whose overseas parents have been prevented from using such words in the European Union since 2003. But the Australian divisions were happy to continue to exploit this outrageous fraud for as long as it took for local regulators to wise up.

Industry sources insist that “descriptors” would still be needed to differentiate varieties of the same brand, repeating the line about the differences being all about taste, not health.

According to one report, the ACCC may accept smooth and fresh as substitutes. Fresh carcinogens? A smooth journey to emphysema, lung cancer or heart disease for one in two long-term users?

The consequences of this conduct are more serious than a telco diddling consumers out of a few hundred dollars with some misleading small contract print or a bait-and-lure ad for sale goods that mysteriously were sold out before the doors opened.

These are the sort of cases where we have become used to seeing the commission chesting companies in court, or negotiating a few days of corrective advertising.

Here, we have a very big, deadly fish on the line with fearsome financial teeth, and in the case of one company, a former state Liberal premier as chairman.

Its behaviour in this decades-long fraud has misled countless Australian smokers into thinking they are reducing their health risks. Many have and will die early as a result. This looms as the biggest test yet of the ACCC's importance.

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