

# "Light" and "Mild" Cigarettes

Let's end the confusion. Now.

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**"R**umours fly! Facts travel by foot." The anonymous author of this wry observation might easily have been thinking about the degree to which smokers are cruelly misguided about the nature of their cigarettes – the majority of smokers still perceive that 'light' and 'mild' cigarettes are safer.<sup>1</sup> For many years, the tobacco industry has sought to benefit from the confusion it has sown regarding the nicotine and tar yields of so-called 'light' cigarettes.<sup>2,3</sup>

Sophisticated drug-delivery devices, cigarettes are carefully designed with sinister intent. They are constructed so as to deliver yields of nicotine that are rapidly absorbed into the pulmonary circulation. With the recognition that tar and nicotine are the fundamental determinants of many of the health consequences of smoking, public health officials and governments argued that reduction of the levels of these ingredients of smoke might reduce the likelihood of, or at least delay, disease and death. The tobacco industry, with reptilian stealth, capitalized on this perspective by aggressively marketing products that were supposedly 'lighter' in their tar and nicotine content but which, by virtue of their design, delivered doses of these constituents to unwitting smokers that were easily equal to or in excess of the loads delivered by 'regular' products.<sup>4</sup> The combination of microscopic perforations in the cigarette tube, and loosely packed tobacco conspired to produce more dilute smoke when the cigarette was placed in a vacuum apparatus for testing purposes. But smokers do not smoke like a vacuum apparatus. Seeking to maintain an individualized level of nicotine, smokers of 'light' cigarettes quickly learn to "oversmoke" (smoke more deeply, puff more frequently and consume more of the total length of the cigarette) and to unconsciously occlude the perforations. The result is entirely predictable: intakes of tar and nicotine are essentially unchanged. What is transformed is the smoker's belief regarding the relative safety of their cigarette. Multiple investigators have revealed that smokers of 'light' cigarettes believe that their choice has reduced their health risks and increased the likelihood of eventual cessation.<sup>5</sup> Not surprising, given the cruel charade of labeling and product-packaging techniques that conspire to suggest that smokers are consuming a less harmful product.

Governments, in retrospect, have been tacit co-conspirators in this process of systematic deception. Initially, with laudable intentions, they mandated the publication of tar and nicotine levels on tobacco packaging. The ability of cigarette designers to construct a product that would minimize yield on smoking machines while at the same time ensuring that a smoker's intake of tar and nicotine would remain essentially unchanged, rendered the labeling of cigarettes futile. The issue becomes more complicated when it is realized that there are a variety of analytical procedures that might be used to assess a cigarette's yield. Not surprisingly, the industry favours approaches that understate true yield. The introduction of a completely undefined range of product descriptors: "light", "mild", "ultra-light" etc. further contributed to the deception of the consumer. Public health authorities have been calling for the elimination of such terminology, and the regulation of industry practices that might permit the deception to continue through the use of package-design and colour-coding schemes.

Elsewhere in this issue, Gendreau and Vitaro<sup>6</sup> provide further proof of the degree to which Canadian product labeling practice misrepresents the true yield of a cigarette's toxic products. They compare the yields of 'light' versus 'regular' cigarettes using a laboratory protocol mandated by the Government of British Columbia (modified ISO) rather than

the traditional Canadian technique (standard ISO). Using an approach applied in the food industry, they sought to assess the degree by which 'light' cigarettes produced yields of chemicals at least 25% lower than those released by the 'regular' product. As might be anticipated, their analysis showed that 'light' cigarettes did not "differ substantially from 'regular' cigarettes".<sup>6</sup>

But rather than suggesting that their additional evidence strengthens the argument for the elimination of the confusing taxonomy of 'mild' and 'light' product descriptors, Gendreau and Vitaro seem to suggest that an adaptation of an approach used in Canadian food labelling practices might be applied to tobacco products. "A compromise", they note in their conclusion, "would give permission to use the label 'light' only when a given constituent shows a reduction of at least 25% from 'regular' cigarettes under modified ISO conditions".<sup>6</sup> An approach which will, in my view, serve to perpetuate the degree of confusion they so rightfully decry. Smokers titrate their cigarette activity so as to maintain an idiosyncratic, preferred level of nicotine.<sup>7</sup> Irrespective of product labeling, smoking behaviour and cigarette consumption will be modified to ensure a certain nicotine intake. Given the suggestion of Gendreau and Vitaro, smokers would likely continue to erroneously believe that smoking 'light' cigarettes, no matter how defined or identified, confers health advantages and might hasten the quitting process. Nothing could be further from the truth.<sup>8</sup> As the authors themselves note: "...toxic exposure from cigarette smoke intake will only be reduced by reducing cigarette consumption, not by smoking 'light' cigarettes."<sup>6</sup>

For some time now, Canadian health officials have been intimating that the use of the 'light' and 'mild' descriptors would be prohibited. Sadly, to this point there has been nothing more than intimation. Authorities elsewhere have moved to eliminate the confusion: the European Parliament adopted a directive that will ban misleading labelling;<sup>9</sup> the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (now adopted by more than 60 nations) requires ratifying nations to ban such descriptors.<sup>10</sup> Canada, an early signatory, ratified the treaty in late 2004. Bill C-71 (the Tobacco Act) gives the Canadian Minister of Health the power to

ban false and misleading messaging on tobacco packages.<sup>11</sup> The Minister should use that power, and the Minister should use that power soon. Misleading labelling is dishonest, and ultimately, dangerous. It should end.

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