EDITORIAL

“Light” and “Mild” Cigarettes

Let’s end the confusion. Now.

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umours fly! Facts travel by foot.” The anonymous author of this wry observa-
tion might easily have been thinking about the degree to which smokers are
usually misguided about the nature of their cigarettes—the majority of smokers
still perceive that “light” and “mild” cigarettes are safer. For many years, the tobacco indus-
try has sought to benefit from the confusion it has sown regarding the nicotine and tar
yields of so-called “light” cigarettes.1,2

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
health professionals argue 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 sup-
posedly “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 even
in excess of the loads delivered by “regular” products.3 The combination of microscopic perfo-
rations 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
depth) in order to consume much of the total length of the cigarette) and unconsciously
avoid the perforations. The result is entirely predictable: inhaled 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 likeli-
hood of eventual cessation.4 Not surprisingly, 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 prod-
uct 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 introduc-
tion 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 prac-
tices that might permit the deception to continue through the use of package-design and
colour-coding schemes.

Elsewhere in this issue, Gendreau and Vitaro5 provide further proof of the degree to which
Canadian product labeling практике misconstrues the true yield of a cigarette’s tobacco
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 (stand-
dard 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 observed by the “regular” product.
As might be anticipated, their analysis showed that “light” cigarettes did not “differ sub-
stantially” from “regular” cigarettes.6

But rather than suggesting that their additional evidence strengthens the argu-
ment for the elimination of the confusing taxonomy of “light” and “mild” product
descriptors, Gendreau and Vitaro seem to suggest that an adjudication of an approach
used in Canadian food labeling practices might be adopted 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”
cigarette under modified ISO conditions.” An approach which will, in my view, serve to perpetuate the degree of confusion they so rightfully decry.

Smokers reiterate their cigarette activity as so to maintain an idiosyncratic, preferred level of nicotine. Irrespective of product labeling, smoking behaviour and cigarette consumption will be modified to ensure a
least certain nicotine intake. Given the sugges-
tion of Gendreau and Vitaro, smokers were likely to 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. As the authors themselves note: “...toxic exposure from cigarette smoke intake will only be reduced by reducing cigarette consumption, not by
smoking “light” cigarettes.”

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 elimi-
nate the confusion: the European Parliament adopted a directive that will ban misleading labeling;7 the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (now adopted by more than 60 nations) requires satisfying nations to ban such descriptors.8 Canada, an early signa-
tory, ratified the treaty in late 2004. Bill C-71 (the Tobacco Act) gives the
Canadian Minister of Health the power to

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ban false and misleading messaging on tobacco packages. The Minister should use that power, and the Minister should use that power soon. Mislabeled labeling is dishonest, and ultimately, dangerous. It should end.

REFERENCES/REFERENCES
4. Peter JW, Doering V, The dark side of mar-