

# Survey of descriptors on cigarette packs: Still misleading consumers?

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## **Abstract**

**AIM:** In September 2008, the New Zealand (NZ) Commerce Commission issued a warning to the major tobacco companies to remove “light” and “mild” descriptors from cigarette packaging. Despite published evidence that suggested tobacco companies had started colour-coding their packs in anticipation of the Commission's decision, the investigation did not consider more general misleading packaging. This study explored changes in tobacco packaging that had been introduced to the New Zealand market, by surveying descriptors used on cigarette packs after the Commerce Commission's warning.

**METHOD:** A convenience sample of discarded cigarette packs were collected in four cities and six towns/rural areas between November 2008 and January 2009. The majority of packs (93%) were collected in the capital city (Wellington). Information on the descriptors and pack colours was analysed.

**RESULTS:** Four percent of the 1208 packs collected still included the terms “light” and “mild”. Almost half the packs (42%) used a colour word (e.g. red, blue, gold) as a descriptor to indicate mildness or strength. A further 18% used other words that suggested mildness/strength (e.g. “subtle”, “mellow”). A quarter of packs used a descriptor that did not connote either mildness or strength; however, the majority of these packs still appeared to be colour-coded.

**CONCLUSION:** Although the words “light” and “mild” have been largely removed from tobacco packaging in the New Zealand market, these words have been replaced with associated colours or other words that may continue to communicate “reduced harm” messages to consumers. Further research to test how smokers interpret the new words and colours, and how these influence their behaviour, is desirable. However, government-mandated generic (plain) packaging would remove the opportunity to communicate misleading claims and so would afford the highest level of consumer protection.

## **Recommended Citation**

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