Misperceptions of "light" cigarettes abound: National survey data

Nick Wilson, Deepa Weerasekera, Jo Peace, Richard Edwards, George Thomson and Miranda Devlin

Abstract

Background: Many smokers believe that "light" cigarettes are less harmful than regular cigarettes, which is at variance with the scientific evidence. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) aims to address this problem in Article 11 which deals with misleading labelling of tobacco products. In this study we aimed to determine smokers' use and beliefs concerning "light" and "mild" cigarettes ("lights"), including in relation to ethnicity, deprivation and other socio-demographic characteristics.

Methods: The New Zealand (NZ) arm of the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Survey (ITC Project) uses as its sampling frame the NZ Health Survey. This is a national sample with boosted sampling of Maori, Pacific peoples and Asians. From this sample we surveyed adult smokers (n = 1376) about use and beliefs relating to "light" cigarettes. We assessed the associations with smoking "lights" after adjusting for socio-demographic variables, and smoking-related behaviours and beliefs.

Results: Many smokers of "lights" believed that smoking "lights" made it easier to quit smoking (25%), that "lights" are less harmful (42%), and that smokers of "lights" take in less tar (43%). Overall most "lights" smokers (60%) had at least one of these three beliefs, a proportion significantly higher than for smokers of "regular" cigarettes at 45% (adjusted odds ratio (aOR) = 1.96, 95% CI = 1.29 – 2.96). While "lights" smokers had significantly lower tobacco consumption and were more aware of smoking harms, they were no more likely to be intending to quit or have made a previous quit attempt. By ethnicity, both Maori and Pacific people were less likely to smoke "lights" than Europeans (aOR = 0.53, 95% CI = 0.35 – 0.80 and aOR = 0.14, 95% CI = 0.05 – 0.40 respectively). In contrast there was no significant difference by level of deprivation. Roll-your-own (RYO) tobacco smokers were less likely to smoke "light" forms of RYO tobacco while both older and women smokers were more likely to smoke "lights".

Conclusion: Most "lights" smokers have one or more misperceptions about the product they use, and were no more likely to intend to quit or to have made a quit attempt. In response to such misperceptions, governments could act further to eliminate all misleading tobacco marketing. Ideally, they could not only adopt FCTC requirements, but go further by requiring plain packaging for all tobacco products.

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