Reviewer’s report

Title: Smokers’ recall of Australian graphic cigarette packet warnings & awareness of associated health effects, 2005-2008

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Reviewer: William Shadel

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This paper reports the results of a large study of how Australian adult smokers’ beliefs and attitudes about smoking changed as a function of several rounds of new graphic warning labels on cigarette packages. Results revealed that beliefs changed in directions predicted by the type of warning labels used on the packages.

This is an interesting study with several strengths: the large, representative sample and multiple waves of survey data linked to introduction of the new labeling, for example. The fact that the paper and study are grounded in theory (i.e., that the study examines theoretical mediators of smoking behavior) is a notable strength. The findings are intriguing, and may have implications for tobacco policy and regulations.

Major Compulsory Revisions

My primary concerns with this paper involve issues of which the authors are already aware. First, while the focus on mediators of smoking is a strength, the fact that this study fails to examine subsequent smoking behavior (actually, quitting behavior) is a weakness. It would be hugely informative if smoking behavior could somehow be analyzed in these studies (I recognize that this might not be possible, given the way that the population was sampled and surveyed). Second, the study is very narrowly focused on the impact of cigarette packaging on smoking beliefs, but other factors – unmeasured in this paper - can influence such beliefs. The lack of control for other confounding factors limits the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn based on these data. Third, the lack of a control of some type (e.g., smokers not exposed to these new graphic package warnings) limits the strength of the conclusions as well.

I had some lingering questions about how smokers were defined and categorized. Daily and intermittent smokers were grouped together as “smokers”, there might be important differences between these different smoker types. Some additional consideration should be given as to how smokers have been defined and analyzed in this study.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.