Reviewer's report

Title: Smoking, heavy smoking and expenditure in low income Chinese: cross-sectional survey

Version: 1 Date: 27 October 2006

Reviewer: Joy de Beyer

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General
1. Overall comments: A generally well written paper and definitely worth publishing.
Although the research question is not new, the study reports new data and provides additional insights into recent trends in smoking and cessation in part of China, with well-drawn policy implications. The findings on quitting behavior are especially interesting, as there is very little published information on quitting in China. The methodology appears sounds and well executed, and is described in adequate detail. The discussion is generally sound - with the exception of the discussion about price elasticity and taxation which could be strengthened (see below). The title and abstract are apt, although it would be a good idea to work the work "quitting" or "cessation" into the title if possible.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
2. Reference [29] is missing from the list. It is cited as the source for the statement on p16, that taxes from cigarettes account for 11% of Chinese central government revenues. I believe that this figure is out of date by several years, and that tobacco taxes are now around 9% of total revenues. The authors should check this statement, or at least provide the year to which the 11% refers, because tobacco is likely to contribute a decreasing percentage of total government revenue as the Chinese economy continues to grow and the tax base to broaden.
3. There are a few typos (eg a word missing in line 2 of the conclusion, and a hyphen where one is not needed on p4 in "carried-out"). The first author should re-read the paper carefully to find and correct them.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
4. I suggest changing the phrase in the abstract about respondents "not admitting to being aware" of the ill effects of passive smoking to "not being aware". "Not admitting" implies that they are aware of the ill-effects but are pretending not to know about them.
5. I find the discussion about price/tax increases the least satisfactory part of the paper. The statement that a tax increase might "simply disproportionately punish the poor" is naive, and ignores 2 considerations. (a) If taxes are levied on an ad valorem basis, then a tax increase would increase the price of more expensive cigarettes (smoked by those with higher incomes) by a larger (absolute) amount than the price increase of the cheapest cigarettes. SO the increase in tax burden on people who smoke the cheapest cigarettes would be the smallest (even though their tobacco expenditures are a larger percentage of their income). (b) People with lower incomes are more price sensitive, so price increases will have a larger effect in discouraging smoking among poorer people, with concomitant health gains.