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TOBACCO PRODUCT AVAILABILITY: CURRENT ISSUES AND NEXT STEPS

The model employed for selling cigarettes in Canada was developed before the dangers of tobacco were widely known. This model makes cigarettes readily available in the retail environment in virtually every neighbourhood around the clock. The recent Institute of Medicine Report on Ending the Tobacco Problem recommends restricting retail sales and implementing regulation of the retail environment (IOM, 2007). Policies related to sales restrictions in various locations have been implemented in a number of jurisdictions.

Ontario currently bans the sale of tobacco products in pharmacies and places connected to a pharmacy, public and private hospitals, psychiatric facilities (except parts of facilities under the Mental Hospitals Act), residential care facilities and by vending machine. Other provinces, such as Nova Scotia and Quebec, have greater restrictions on sales locations (OTRU, 2009).

These restrictions however do little to affect the widespread availability of tobacco. Currently, there is wide variation in the estimated number of outlets selling tobacco, primarily convenience or grocery stores. The estimated number of outlets in Ontario range from 16,000 to 17,576 and, in Canada, the estimates range from 40,000 to 65,000 (NSRA, 2005).

According to a 2008 Ontario Public Opinion poll,^a 35% of those polled suggested that tobacco should be sold in special stores as alcohol is, 30% of people felt that tobacco should not be sold at all, and 23% suggested that tobacco be phased out as soon as possible. Most Ontario adults in the poll (63%) also believe that the number of retail outlets that sell cigarettes should be greatly reduced.

The policy potential for reducing the availability of tobacco is a core area of tobacco control that has not been adequately explored. More than 30 tobacco control researchers, advocates and policy makers came together on November 11th, 2008, as part of *Tobacco Control for the 21st Century*, to discuss options for dealing with availability—one of the next frontiers of a comprehensive tobacco control strategy.

The one day session addressed issues related to marketing at point-of-sale within the larger context of industry marketing of tobacco; the current state of affairs with respect to tobacco availability; models of availability in other fields, specifically those used for alcohol and illicit drugs; issues of alternative access sources and political issues in implementation and next steps.¹

Based on information presented at the workshop, the following recommendations were offered as next steps for research and practice:

Research

Greater understanding of the impact of outlets and outlet density

1. To ascertain numbers of convenience stores selling tobacco products
2. To study the relationship between convenience stores and contraband sales of tobacco products
3. To conduct a pilot study about the convenience store owners' knowledge pertaining to impact of tobacco on health

^a 2008 CAMH Monitor Survey, "Panel A" Jan-Jun 2008 (= 996), analysis by OTRU

4. To examine the relationship among decreasing number of outlets and how this might impact on competition, tobacco prices, impulse purchases, and relapse rates
5. To learn more about the association among number of outlets and restrictions on opening hours (lunch time and late night) and how this might impact sales to youth
6. To study the impact of display bans at retail on purchasing patterns
7. To examine the impact of tobacco availability on behaviour change, attitudes, and access
8. To conduct a time series study about the associations among tobacco outlet density, prevalence of smoking, and consumption of tobacco products
9. To create a provincial database regarding number of outlets, type, and density of outlets according to socioeconomic status within neighbourhoods

Youth and Tobacco Use

10. To involve youth in the research process (media advocacy)
11. To engage in social networking research on youth's social circles and patterns of interaction related to smoking

Legal / Licensure

12. To conduct legal research on licensure
13. To study jurisdiction/property rights

Policy Research

14. To study the impact of current policies in places where point of sale displays are reduced or eliminated compared to those jurisdictions where displays are not restricted.

Licensure

14. To develop a licensing system with provision to revoke licences for sales to minors and sales of contraband cigarettes; monitoring and enforcement built in; a display location for license; a renewal policy; and fees high enough to deter some retailers from acquiring a license.

Zoning / Location Bans

15. To establish density limits on the number of outlets according to zoning regulations, for example, buffered zones around schools and "safe routes" for children and youth near schools, parks, malls, and other gathering places
16. To ban tobacco on college and university campuses

Next Steps

There is an urgent need for Canadian based evaluation of the impact of wide spread availability of tobacco and of interventions that may mitigate that effect. A working group is required to develop strategies at the grassroots level to encourage municipalities and jurisdictions to make use of available licensing of tobacco at retail.

¹ See <http://www.otru.org/conference/files/details/availability.html> for the full program

References

Institute of Medicine (IOM). *Ending the Tobacco Problem: A Blueprint for the Nation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2007.

Non-Smokers' Rights Association. Montreal Workshop. Preliminary Report. February 2005. Retrieved November 17, 2007 from http://www.nsra-adnf.ca/cms/index.cfm?group_id=1456

Ontario Tobacco Research Unit. *The Tobacco Control Environment: Ontario and Beyond*. Monitoring and Evaluation Series (Vol. 15, No. 1). Prohibition of Tobacco Sales in Specific Places: Monitoring Update. Toronto, ON: Ontario Tobacco Research Unit, September 22, 2009.