LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters intended for publication should be a maximum of 500 words, 10 references, and one table or figure, and should be sent to the editor at the address given on the inside front cover. Those responding to articles or correspondence published in the journal should be received within six weeks of publication.

Support from retailers for tightening the Western Australian Tobacco Control Act 1990

EDITOR,—In 1996, 29% of 12–17 year old smokers in Western Australia were able to purchase cigarettes from a retail outlet despite the Western Australia Tobacco Control Act (1990) prohibiting the sale and supply of tobacco products to persons under the age of 18 years.[1 2] The fines imposed on retailers prosecuted under the Act ($A5000 and $A20 000 maximum for an individual retailer and a corporate body, respectively) have not deterred retailers from selling cigarettes to minors, suggesting additional measures are needed to reduce adolescent access to cigarettes. We conducted a postal survey to determine the level of support among owners and managers of retail outlets in Western Australia for making it illegal for minors (under 18 years of age) to sell cigarettes and other tobacco products, removing all indoor point-of-sale advertising and having to store cigarettes and other tobacco products out of sight, under the counter.

We chose a random sample of 630 from the 4120 eligible retail outlets in Western Australia listed in the current online Australian Yellow Pages directory. We telephoned each outlet to verify that it was still in business, obtain the name of the owner and manager of the outlet, and confirm willingness to receive the survey.

Consenting owners or managers were asked to complete a 25 item questionnaire regarding their level of support using five point Likert scales ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). In view of anecdotal reports of tobacco companies underwriting the cost of re-fitting shops in return for guaranteed access to a significant proportion of the display area, we asked whether each outlet had received an offer of this kind. We also sought respondents' age, sex, country of birth, and smoking status.

Of 446 (70%) outlets agreeing to participate, 236 (53%) returned a questionnaire, yielding a 37% response from our original sample. The majority of respondents (71%) felt that cigarettes and other tobacco products were important in attracting passing trade, and 88% reported that, at least half of the time, someone buying cigarettes in the shop would also buy something else. Twenty eight per cent of the outlets had been approached by a tobacco company with an offer to meet the costs of remodelling the display and counter area. Petrol stations and food/general stores were approached more often than the other types of outlets ($\chi^2 = 17.2$; df = 4; p = 0.002).

Almost half (46%) of respondents were in favour of making it illegal for minors to sell cigarettes and tobacco, with an additional 18% undecided. Respondents born outside Australia (36%) were more likely to support this suggested change ($\chi^2 = 11.4$; df = 4; p = 0.02). Responses were similar for owners and managers, and across categories of smoking status and sex of the respondent.

One third (34%) of respondents were in favour of removing point-of-sale advertising and an additional 19% were undecided. There was little support for storing cigarettes and other tobacco products under the counter (13%).

The considerable support among owners and managers for removing all indoor (point-of-sale) advertising and making it illegal for minors to sell cigarettes is particularly noteworthy. As retailers perceive that tobacco products are important in attracting passing trade, it seems they place a premium on being able to sell cigarettes over and above being permitted to advertise them. Rather, the tobacco companies must feel it is necessary to advertise at the point-of-sale, thus exposing the whole community, young as well as old, non-smokers as well as smokers, to a message that cigarettes are a normal part of life. We have confirmed that tobacco companies do make offers to meet the costs of refitting shops, with anecdotal reports that they seek, in return, preferential rights to display their products. The reasons behind the low level of support for storing cigarettes and other tobacco products under the counter were not explored, but might include the high cost for remodelling the counter area of shops to accommodate additional storage space for tobacco products.

While further studies should be conducted to verify our results, there is already a foundation on which to build support among retailers for strengthening tobacco control legislation in Western Australia.

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1 Public Health Division, Health Department of Western Australia, the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria. *Cigarette consumption among Western Australian school students in 1996*. Perth: Development and Support Branch, Public Health Division, HDWA; 1998.
2 Stead M, Hastings G, Tudor-Smith C. Preventing adolescent smoking: a review of options. *Health Educ J* 1996;**55**:31–54.

Origins of "denicotinised" tobacco

EDITOR,—It has been known for more than 150 years that nicotine is the chemical in tobacco that is responsible for the perceived salutary as well as the adverse effects among users. Efforts to market "denicotinised" tobacco have repeatedly failed. The 1964 report of the advisory committee to the US Surgeon General stated, "Denicotinized tobacco has not found general public acceptance as a substitute."[1] Recently, Philip Morris Companies withdrew "Next", their low nicotine cigarette brand, because of poor sales. However, Liggett Group chief executive officer Bennett Lebow plans to market a genetically engineered "low nicotine" tobacco in 2002 as an aid for smoking cessation. What are the origins of tobacco companies' interest in marketing low nicotine brands? The following sketch from an 1852 issue of *Scientific American*,[2] quoted in its entirety, sheds some light on this question:

> "Great Discovery for Tobacco Smokers
> It will be seen by reference to our advertising columns that a new preparation of smoking tobacco has been offered in our market, the peculiar excellence of which consists in the extraction of the poisonous qualities without affecting the fine flavor and aroma of the weed. The proprietors placed in our hands some time since a package of this tobacco for trial and we can speak from experience when we say it is a most mild and delightful article. It takes away from the antitobacco men their chief argument, for it has no nicotine in it and can be used with safety as well as pleasure by persons whose nerves are affected by smoking. For ourselves, we intend never to be without this denicotinized tobacco, and trust that its proprietors will be liberally patronized by the public. It is for sale by Bennet & Beers.—(Richmond Va.) Republican."
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> "When the nicotine is extracted will it be tobacco? Would we be wheat if all the starch were extracted. Nicotine gives tobacco its peculiar flavour. We should like to see what kind of tobacco this was with *all* the nicotine gone."

One might conclude from this piece that by 1852 tobacco companies recognised at least some of the dangers of their product, understood the "poisonous" qualities of nicotine, discovered how to remove nicotine from tobacco, and crafted an aggressive marketing effort that linked "denicotinised" tobacco and "safety", for a leading science journal of the day. Since the nicotine content of "denicotinised" tobacco has varied widely,[3] one can only speculate whether Bennet & Beers—and *Scientific American*—were marketing a nicotine-free tobacco or merely a lower nicotine content product.

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1 US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Smoking and health. Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service*. Washington, DC: Public Health Service, 1964. (PHS Publication No. 1103.)
2 Anon. Great discovery for tobacco smokers. *Scientific American* 1852;7(32):250. (No author cited.)
3 Gottsegen JJ. Tobacco. *A study of its consumption in the United States*. New York. Pitman Publishing Corp, 1940.

How US airlines became smoke free

EDITOR,—The development of the US Federal Aviation Administration policy to prohibit smoking in both the passenger cabin and flight deck of scheduled passenger flights[1 2] offers lessons that may be considered in other countries and workplace settings. This policy was driven by the findings that environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) is a serious health risk to those exposed, that aircraft air quality was adversely affected by cigarette smoke, and by frequent complaints of respiratory irritation by crew and passengers.[3–5] Similar concerns have been raised in other occupational settings such as