Would Different Warning Labels on Cigarettes Prevent Smoking?

Campaigns to inform the public about the hazards in smoking have reduced cigarette use in the United States. Information is particularly useful in preventing young people from beginning to smoke. It is more difficult to stop those who are already smokers. One method that is directed at smokers themselves is the use of warning labels on cigarette packs. The phrase, “Cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health” was first mandated by Congress in 1965. In 1984, the warnings were expanded to include four, somewhat more specific statements, including a warning to women about smoking in pregnancy. However, when the effect of these labels is examined, there does not seem to be much reduction in tobacco sales as a result of the labels. People become immune to the labels and ignore their warnings. One recent study with teen-agers found that they did not change their smoking behavior after reading the labels. In 2005, the World Health Organization recommended that warning labels be made more effective.

Canada began a prevention campaign like that in 2000. In Canada, labels are much larger than those in the United States and are very specific about the damage that smoking can do. For instance, they describe how smoking will cause damage to the heart and show a picture to illustrate. In Canada, many smokers who were able to quit using cigarettes reported that they had been influenced by these labels.

To investigate the possibility that such labels would help with prevention efforts in this country, the effect of these more emphatic warnings on both smokers and nonsmokers in the United States was tested by a group of researchers in Oregon (Peters, et al., 2007). Adults volunteered after reading about the study in the newspaper and were asked their impressions of either the standard U.S. warning labels or the Canadian
version. The study found that people paid more attention to the Canadian labels and that they felt significantly more negatively toward smoking after viewing them than those who viewed the U.S. labels. Smokers as well as nonsmokers reported feeling more negative toward smoking after viewing the Canadian labels and both groups reported that they felt that the labels were truthful. When asked if the United States should adopt the more effective Canadian labels, 81% of the nonsmokers and 60% of the smokers agreed. One advantage to adopting such labels would be their effectiveness in getting their message to the group most needing the information, current smokers.

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