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Ugly packages looking pretty good

The proposed introduction of legislation to enforce plain packaging of cigarettes has caused some controversy and debate; a debate fuelled by the seemingly desperate attempts by the tobacco industry to convince us that no branding, no logos and no corporate colours on cigarette packs will have no beneficial effect; and might somehow lead to an increase in smoking.

In any event, the World Health Organization (WHO) has praised the Australian proposal in its most recent public health news bulletin, stating that we would be the first country to implement a specific recommendation of the so-called Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). This convention or treaty is the only one ever negotiated amongst countries under the auspices of the WHO and it confers legal obligations on the parties that have formally acceded to the treaty.

This year on World No Tobacco Day, 31 May, it is the aim of WHO to highlight the importance of the FCTC.

Obligations under the treaty include: adopting price and tax measures to reduce the demand for tobacco; protecting people from exposure to tobacco smoke; banning tobacco advertising and promotion; offering people help to overcome their addiction to tobacco; and regulating the packaging and labelling of tobacco products.

Regardless of how cigarettes are presented, there would hardly be a man, woman or even child in Australia who doesn't know about the dangers of smoking.

We know that smoking is the greatest single preventable cause of death and disease in the world. This year nearly 6 million people will die from a tobacco-related heart attack, stroke, cancer, a lung ailment or other disease. This doesn't include the more than 600,000 people (about a quarter of them children) who will die from exposure to second hand-smoke. So why would anyone still be a smoker?

Well, there are probably many reasons why people begin to smoke – peer pressure is a particularly relevant factor in young women – and the reality is, once you start smoking it's mighty hard to stop. Nearly two thirds of smokers would like to stop smoking, but fewer than 1 in 20 people who try to quit will actually remain non-smokers after three months.

Up until recently, it was thought that stopping smoking completely – either cold turkey or with the help of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) – was the best way to ensure becoming a long term non-smoker. But this “quick stop” method doesn't suit everyone.

The “cut down then stop” (CDTS) method has now been given the official seal of approval. Evidence has shown that reducing the number of cigarettes smoked with the assistance of NRT, makes it easier for some heavily addicted smokers to ultimately quit completely.

Also, the simultaneous use of more than one nicotine replacement therapy product used not to be considered appropriate. But experience has shown that some smokers who continue to have cravings with single therapy, or those who have quit in the past and then relapsed, will benefit and become long-term quitters by using the patches and gum together.

NRT can be a useful tool for just about everybody to assist with smoking cessation; that is everybody regardless of age, sex or medical history; and using NRT to quit is always safer than continuing to smoke.

There are many myths and misconceptions about the effects of nicotine and NRT. If you need some help to quit, make sure you get the facts and the right advice on what products will suit you best. Ask for the fact cards on *Smoking* and *Staying a Non-smoker* from one of the pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 or check out the website at www.psa.org.au for the nearest location.