

TOBACCO INDUSTRY TAKEN TO TASK OVER 'LIGHT' DESCRIPTORS

Action on Smoking and health (ASH) and Smokefree Coalition Media Release - 27 September 2006

News that the tobacco industry appears to be on the back foot worldwide regarding its marketing of 'light' cigarettes has been welcomed by tobacco control groups in New Zealand.

In July this year, with the support of a number of key health groups and academics, the Smokefree Coalition lodged a complaint with the Commerce Commission in New Zealand about tobacco companies misleading smokers by implying that there are health benefits from smoking 'light' or 'mild' cigarettes. The Commerce Commission has agreed to investigate.

Now a New York federal judge has allowed a class action suit against the tobacco industry to proceed, seeking up to US\$2bn in damages. 'Light' and 'mild' descriptors have also been banned recently in other countries including Australia and Brazil. Canada is in the process of implementing a ban.

"It looks like the game is up for big tobacco," said Mark Peck, director of the Smokefree Coalition. "They've literally made billions of dollars by presenting 'light' or 'mild' cigarettes as a safer product or as an alternative to quitting, when they have known all along that these products carry the exact same level of risk for heart attacks, lung cancer and other tobacco-related diseases."

Mark Peck believes the time has come to hold the tobacco companies to account. "Taking them on is never easy, but it is encouraging to see others around the world doing the same thing we are doing here, despite the money and legal resources big tobacco has. It's important that we and others don't give in."

Becky Freeman of ASH New Zealand agrees. "Deceptive marketing about a product that kills is not a trivial issue. The extent of the deception and loss of life warrants immediate court action." she said.

"It's not a problem that the Commerce Commission can address by having a bit of a chat to sort out some form of voluntary agreement with the tobacco industry. Holding the industry accountable in a court of law is absolutely necessary to ensure justice is served.

"We believe the Commission has a duty to act on behalf of all deceived New Zealanders. We urge them to take court action against the tobacco industry because smokers are not able to pursue a similar class action suit here in New Zealand."

Tobacco control groups such as ASH and the Smokefree Coalition point out that the fact that many in New Zealand believe that 'light' or 'mild' cigarettes are a less harmful option reveals just how successful the tobacco companies have been.

"Tobacco companies do a lot of work around their so-called 'low tar' products because they know there are health concerns about smoking," said Becky Freeman. "But they also know that they're just as addictive and harmful, and that smokers will tend to smoke them more heavily, more often or both."

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For more information, please contact

Mark Peck, Director, Smokefree Coalition
Phone: 04 472 0157, Mobile: 0274 461 650
Email: director@sfc.org.nz

Or

Becky Freeman, Director, ASH.
Phone: 09 5204575, Mobile: 021 733 444
Email : bfreeman@ash.org.nz