LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Ethnic and racial blindness in EU anti-smoking campaigns, slogans and images

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The USA took the lead when in 1964 it legally required cigarette manufacturers to include a warning about the potential danger posed by cigarettes [1, 2]. Although the warning introduced by Surgeon General Luther Terry has been criticised as weak [3], there can be little doubt that it was both an important milestone in the start of a concerted attack on Big Tobacco and set an important precedent and guide for future anti-smoking text warnings. Big Tobacco is collectively five companies that control 90% of the world's cigarette market which produce more than 5.4 billion cigarettes a year [4]. Despite the best efforts of Big Tobacco [5], the text-based anti-smoking warnings in many countries became more direct and forceful. Historically, the issue of racial invisibility or under-representation in anti-smoking tobacco packaging warnings was less of an issue when such warnings were purely text-based. Assuming a certain level of literacy in the official language or languages of the state, anti-smoking warnings were essentially 'colour-blind'.

Given the importance of the necessary self-referential element in effective tobacco control warnings [6], the introduction of anti-smoking graphic images in recent years necessitates the inclusion of racial diversity in the graphic images used [7]. This diversity is ostensibly lacking in both sets of European Union graphic images produced to date. Neither the original set of 42 graphic anti-smoking images produced by

the European Union [8] nor the revised 42 combined warnings obviously include any member of a racial or ethnic minority [9] (see Fig. 1 as an example).

The absence of racial diversity in the anti-smoking graphical warnings is particularly notable on three grounds. Firstly, it is surprising given the specific targeting of racial and ethnic minority members globally by Big Tobacco [10]. Tobacco companies have a long history of differentiated marketing designed to entice distinct market segments into smoking, including both race and gender [10, 11]. Secondly, the absence is surprising given the numbers of ethnic and racial minority members in Europe and Australasia. In the UK, for example, the 2011 census indicates a population of 1.4 million people identifying as Indian (separate to other ethnic identities from the Indian subcontinent) [12]. Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that although overall smoking rates among ethnic group members in countries such as the UK may be lower than those of the majority population [13], this figure hides important differences in gender-specific smoking rates which can be attributed to cultural and societal norms held within these ethnic groups. For example, although the prevalence of smokers in the White male population in the UK was 20.8% in 2014, the comparable figure for Bangladeshi males was 28.1% [13]. This complete absence of any racial or ethnic diversity effectively discounts the negative impacts of smoking in non-White groups. This effectively normalises smoking in such groups, supporting the differential marketing of tobacco companies. It is therefore important that in reviewing the use of images for tobacco packaging, all ethnicities of a country are represented—not just the dominant White culture.

In some ways, this 'colour blindness' in relation to race and ethnicity fits mainstream ideological perspectives in some countries. For example, although it is perfectly 'normal' in the UK, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, Australia and the USA to ask questions about race and ethnicity, in some countries, such as France, it is illegal for state agencies

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Fig. 1 Example of an EU-mandated cigarette packet anti-smoking graphic [9]

to do so [14]. What makes the French stance particularly interesting is that some areas of France are notably mixed on the basis of race.

An interesting example is the island of Reunion, an overseas department and region of France. Officially part of France, and therefore in the European Union, this island is located between Madagascar and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean and has a population of approximately 880,000. Uninhabited, when initially colonised by the Portuguese, it is racially something of a melting pot, combining populations of African, Indian, Malagasy, Chinese and European descent [15]. This diverse nation, although ruled by France, would struggle to identify with many of the pictorial warnings used in the EU. It is interesting to note that the cigarette packet-based anti-smoking graphics that were to be introduced in the USA in 2012 clearly included members of racial minorities [16]. However, attempts to introduce these graphics in the USA were defeated in a successful legal challenge by Big Tobacco [17].

There are many other examples of anti-smoking health promotion initiatives targeting diverse racial and ethnic groups [18, 19]. Examples from Australasia include the 'Give up smokes for good' campaign aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia [20] and initiatives such as the "Every cigarette" campaign [21] and "E te whānau awhi Mai/ My baby is Māori and will be smokefree" campaign in New Zealand [22]. However, the graphic anti-smoking images required on cigarette packets by both Australia and New Zealand may similarly be problematic in their racial under-representation [23, 24]. Lastly, it is

important to ensure that the inclusion of a more diverse cast of characters does not lead to increased racism and facilitate pejorative out-group judgements. However, this is easily overcome by having images incorporating people that are from minority groups alongside the European majority White population.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Research involving human participants and/or animals N/A.

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