



## The prevalence of misleading tobacco descriptors in the New Zealand tobacco market

**Background**—The New Zealand Commerce Commission has recently commenced an investigation into the misleading use of the terms “light” and “mild” on cigarette packets in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> Such action is fully consistent with New Zealand’s treaty responsibilities, since part of the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control requires action on misleading descriptors.<sup>2</sup> To inform the political and official considerations on this issue, we undertook an examination of the prevalence of light and mild descriptors for tobacco products in the New Zealand setting.

**Methods**—We examined data provided by tobacco manufacturers to the Ministry of Health for tobacco products in 2005.<sup>3</sup> The findings were contextualised with New Zealand survey data on smokers’ beliefs and international publications identified on Medline searches.

**Table 1. “Light” and “mild” descriptors used in cigarette labelling in NZ in 2005**

Descriptor	Number of brands using that descriptor*
“Mild”	11
“Ultra mild”	1
“Superior mild”	1
“Extra mild”	4
“Menthol mild”	4
“Super mild”	6
“Golden mild”	1
<b>Subtotal—any “mild”</b>	<b>28</b>
“Lights”	12
“Deluxe lights”	1
“Super lights”	2
“Ultra lights”	2
“Menthol lights”	1
“Classic lights”	1
“Silver lights”	1
<b>Subtotal—any “lights”</b>	<b>20</b>

\*There were two brands that had both “lights” and “mild” as descriptors (i.e. “Mild Seven Superlights” and “Mild Seven Lights”) and so these are counted twice in this table.

**Results**—The terms “light” and “mild” are common descriptors in the New Zealand tobacco market in 2005 (Table 1). Collectively, 44% of the manufactured cigarette brands listed for sale in 2005 contained at least one of the brand name descriptors listed in the Table (46/104). In terms of manufactured cigarettes sold in New Zealand in 2005, those with at least one of these descriptors comprised 28% of the market (i.e. 665 million out of 2345 million cigarette sticks). Assuming an average of 20 cigarettes per packet, this equates to 33 million packets annually with these descriptors printed on them.

We identified one survey with data on the descriptor issue in New Zealand – a survey of 2709 smokers.<sup>4</sup> It reported that 36% of the sample smoked light or mild cigarettes (27% of Maori, 40% of females). Those who reported smoking light and mild were asked why they smoked these types (they could give more than one reason). In the unprompted responses, 23% provided some health-related reason for their choice, and a further 5% thought that light or mild cigarettes were “less addictive” and/or “easier to quit”.

**Discussion**—This analysis found that “light” and “mild” descriptors are commonly used to describe New Zealand cigarettes. Yet this analysis may underestimate the scale of this marketing strategy as it did not include descriptors such as “low tar”, descriptors on packets of roll-your-own tobacco and packet colouring (e.g. light blue colouring) which may be used to imply “mildness”.<sup>5</sup>

The international literature suggests that many smokers choose “mild” or “light” cigarettes because they think that these cigarettes may be less harmful to their health than regular cigarettes.<sup>6-9</sup> In a survey of smokers in Canada, USA, Britain, and Australia, large proportions believed that “light” cigarettes had some reduced health risk compared to regular cigarettes (Canada: 43%, US: 51%, Australia: 55%, UK: 70%).<sup>10</sup>

The New Zealand survey data also indicate health-related beliefs for choice of light/mild cigarettes (as detailed in the *Results* section above). The lower proportions reporting smoking light/mild cigarettes because of reduced health risk compared to the international surveys cited above probably reflects the unprompted nature of the question.

However, the epidemiological evidence suggests that the health outcomes from smoking light/mild cigarettes are as grave and as common as those from smoking other cigarettes.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, smoking lights does not appear to lead to greater quit attempts, despite a greater wish to quit amongst such smokers.<sup>12</sup>

There is evidence that many smokers are switching to lights/mild on the mistaken assumption of reduced health risks, instead of quitting,<sup>13</sup> and tobacco companies appear to have been deliberately using the descriptors to encourage this behaviour.<sup>14</sup> As a result, light and mild descriptors are helping to maintain the high smoking prevalence and severely undermining efforts to reduce the health effects of tobacco within the New Zealand population.

This evidence suggests the current Commerce Commission investigation into the light and mild issue in New Zealand is wholly appropriate. The danger of misleading cigarette brand names also suggests that the Commission needs to consider misleading brand names such as *Freedom*, as argued elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Currently this further action is not being considered by the Commission.<sup>16</sup>

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