

GTNF 2015

Bologna, Italy

Sept. 15–17

Session 17: Plain products

Even though I don't believe that tobacco products should be sold in medically explicit—i.e., plain—packs or banned from retail displays, I accept that there are reasonable arguments to support the imposition of such packaging and bans. But I find it difficult to accept that there are any reasonable arguments in support of plain products, which were the subject of the final regulation stream panel session at the GTNF in Bologna in September. If an adult tobacco user has gone to the trouble to choose a tobacco product from a shuttered cabinet and bought it even after being presented with a medically explicit pack, surely she deserves to enjoy that product to the full. To legislate so as to render that legal product in a form less enjoyable than the manufacturer can deliver it is not the action of a protective government but of one acting out of spite. Such legislation must be being driven not by those interested in tobacco control but by those who cannot bear the thought that somebody somewhere is enjoying a product whose pleasures they cannot understand. It is draconian legislation that treats adults as infants.

The session was given a comprehensive description of the sorts of standardizations that are being applied and proposed in respect of individual cigarettes. Some standardizations concern the look of the cigarette, so branding might be banned and the color of the filter stipulated. Others will affect the taste of the cigarette, so flavors might be banned and blends and filter ventilation stipulated. And yet others will transcend looks and taste, or at least smoking perceptions as, for instance, size formats are stipulated.

There will be knock-on effects, too, in the case that certain ingredients are banned or unreasonable ceilings placed on certain smoke constituents, such as nitrosamines and formaldehyde, which would make the use of tobaccos such as burley and oriental problematic if not impossible.

Consumers will be affected because product differentiation will largely disappear and the perceived value of their brands will be reduced, taking away their incentive to pay for higher-priced products. But will they stop smoking as a result? Probably not, if nicotine addiction is as powerful as we are led to believe it is, especially given that many will have access to illicit products that won't be bound by the limitations that will govern licit products. It seems likely that standardizing the product that is actually consumed would produce a far greater boost for the illegal trade than medically explicit packaging ever would.

With consumers unwilling to pay higher prices for seemingly undifferentiated products, manufacturers will likely suffer reduced margins, but they will also enjoy cost savings as, presumably, they produce fewer products and benefit from production and distribution savings.

Part of the drive for plain products has possibly come from the success in some markets of slim and super-slim cigarettes, but, as the session was told, this success has been only relative; it has come at the expense of regular cigarettes. So while it is legal to smoke cigarettes, it seems unfair—and rather

out of character in most cases—for governments to try to move the market for these products from a demand-led one to a supply-led one.

The session was told that standardizing products would not of itself reduce the harm done by those products and that the process of such standardization was simply bureaucratic harassment.

It is also illogical. As one panelist pointed out, if the belief behind product standardization was that it could prevent people from smoking, then why would one concentrate on what are effectively niche products: slim and flavored cigarettes? Why wouldn't one standardize on a slim menthol cigarette?

The same panelist made the point, too, that in concentrating on products such as fruit-flavored cigarettes the authorities were fighting a demon that really didn't exist. Where were these products, he asked. And he was especially critical of the idea that somehow young people were drawn to fruit-flavored cigarettes. Teenagers weren't known for their love of eating fruit. They weren't to be found in gangs on street corners trying to score strawberries.

During the session my mind went back to Moscow at the time when the Soviet Union was breaking up and people queued for food but lay down in front of trams to demand cigarettes, which were in short supply. They weren't lying down for papirosy, for American-blend cigarettes or for cigarettes with cork tipping; they just wanted cigarettes. Standardizing products might cause disappointment among smokers, problems for manufacturers and a loss of revenue for governments. But in the end, one way or another, smokers will obtain the cigarettes they want, manufacturers will adapt, and the major losses, it seems, will hit only government revenues and, therefore, society at large.