Ottawa announces proposal to add warning labels to individual cigarettes

By CARLY WEEKS
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Tobacco companies will be forced to add warning labels to individual cigarettes under a new proposal designed to discourage smoking, Mental Health and Addictions Minister Carolyn Bennett announced on Friday.

"Poison in every puff" is one of the proposed warnings to appear on individual cigarettes.

The move would make Canada the first country in the world to mandate warning labels on individual cigarettes, a move applauded by smoking-cessation experts as an important step toward reducing tobacco use in Canada.

"This kind of warning obviously attracts attention and will reinforce peoples' decision to do something about their nicotine addiction," said Andrew Pipe, a clinician scientist at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute and past chair of the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

Putting a warning on individual cigarettes is also an important way to ensure that young people are seeing the message, as they often start out by borrowing a cigarette from an older sibling or friend and may not see graphic warning labels on packages, said Rob Cunningham, senior policy analyst at the Canadian Cancer Society.

"These messages will reach every smoker with every puff," Mr. Cunningham said.

Other changes proposed by the government include new graphic warning labels on packages that would be rotated over time to maintain their novelty and effectiveness, and a new warning label on the side of packages containing information on the toxic ingredients in cigarettes.

The new federal proposals are open for a consultation period, after which they could be changed to reflect what was heard during that period. The final regulations are expected to be published early next year.

Canada was the first country to introduce graphic warning labels on cigarette packages in 2001. In 2019, the federal government also brought new plain packaging rules into force, which prohibit tobacco companies from using logos, pictures or brand colours on cigarette packages.

Smoking rates have experienced a major decline in recent decades largely because of warning labels and a series of other public-health measures and awareness campaigns. According to Statistics Canada, current smoking rates were 13 per cent in 2020, the lowest rate ever reported. In 1965, the smoking rate was about 50 per cent.

But tobacco remains a leading cause of death, with nearly 50,000 Canadians dying each year as a result of illness caused by smoking. And tens of thousands of others live with debilitating chronic diseases.

So more work needs to be done, said Dr. Pipe, such as trying to recoup health care costs from the tobacco industry.

Mr. Cunningham said the government needs to continue this work, creating a comprehensive tobacco control strategy that could include further limits on tobacco promotion and higher taxes, among other measures.