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## Light, mild and misleading

### Cigarette labelling fools one in four smokers, studies say

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OTTAWA -- Studies commissioned by Health Canada show that many smokers remain "confused or misled" by the labels "light" and "mild" and one prominent anti-smoking activist says the fact that cigarette packs still bear these labels is a testament to the strength of tobacco companies.

After a major advertising campaign informed Canadians three years ago that light and mild cigarettes are just as harmful as regular ones, the federal government commissioned two studies -- one in 2002 and one in 2003 -- to monitor how smokers responded to the labels.

Although a majority of the smokers surveyed perceived that all cigarettes are equally damaging to their health, the studies, which have never been publicized, found that one in four still believed the light and mild brands were safer.

"They really established the case that the labels were misleading and that the labels were making [smokers] feel that the cigarettes were safer," said Cynthia Callard, executive director of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada.

"The fact that we have this expertise and action isn't happening isn't so much a signal about government incompetence, it's more about the power of the industry."

Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh said this year that he wants to ban the "light" and "mild" labels, which the tobacco companies say refer only to taste. But Mr. Dosanjh also said he would have to consult with the justice minister regarding potential backlash from the tobacco companies. His office was unable to provide information late last week to indicate what steps, if any, he was taking on the matter.

Former Liberal health minister Alan Rock threatened to institute such a ban in 2001 but he was shuffled from the portfolio before he could act. His successors, Anne McLellan and Pierre Pettigrew, did not move on the file.

Because the federal government pushed the tobacco companies in the 1970s to introduce and promote light and mild cigarettes, the government found itself in the uncomfortable position late last year of joining Imperial Tobacco in fighting a class-action suit that charged the packages labelled light and mild constitute consumer fraud. Last week, the B.C. Supreme Court certified that suit, launched by Kenneth Knight of Robert's Creek, B.C.

The decision came a day before Ms. Callard obtained copies of the studies, conducted by a Montreal research firm, that had been shelved in the National Library. The first study targeted 609 smokers in six shopping malls in different areas of Canada. The second was based on phone interviews with 1,198 people, about half of whom were smokers.

Ms. Callard said the studies contain "very important findings" because they show that cigarette package labels do not do what the tobacco companies say they do and just give smokers a cue to flavour.

Smokers surveyed in 2002 said the light and mild labels related to certain cigarette characteristics, including addictiveness, nicotine level and throat irritation -- but not taste. That study found that cigarettes that are labelled light or mild present a more desirable image -- two-thirds of smokers regularly purchase a light or mild brand.

The 2003 survey found significant confusion among smokers regarding the meaning of the words light and mild. While 45 per cent of smokers said they opposed removing the words from package labels, compared to the 37 per cent that approved of removing them, six in 10 said they would not be annoyed if they were taken off the packages.

That second survey also found that the level of resistance would be likely to grow should the removal decision not be properly communicated or explained.

By not releasing the studies the government is "hiding their light under a bushel -- and it's quite a light." Ms. Callard said.

"This is very, very, very good research, and they're not providing people with the information that they need to know."