

Non-smokers' responses when smokers light up: A population-based study

Daniella Germain, Melanie Wakefield*, Sarah Durkin

*Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, Cancer Control Research Institute, The Cancer Council Victoria, 1 Rathdowne Street,
Carlton Victoria 3053, Australia*

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Abstract

Objective. This study examines the extent to which the 'common courtesy approach' is adopted by non-smokers when in the presence of smokers, in the state of Victoria, Australia, where restrictions on smoking in public places are relatively comprehensive.

Method. 4,765 non-smokers aged 18 years and over were surveyed over two representative population telephone-administered surveys of randomly sampled Victorians conducted in 2004 and 2005.

Results. Only 5.5% of non-smokers said they would ask a person to stop smoking if they lit up a cigarette nearby. The majority of non-smokers (74.7%) reported they would move away and 16.4% said they would do nothing.

When asked what they would do if, in a public place, someone next to them asked if they minded whether they smoked, 48.8% of non-smokers reported they would say they would prefer it if they didn't smoke, while 28.0% reported that they would tell the person they don't mind when they would prefer that person not smoke. Overall, 46.7% of non-smokers indicated they would consent to be exposed to second-hand smoke if someone asked them this question.

Conclusions. Our findings underline the importance of smoke-free policies in protecting a significant proportion of the non-smoker population, who remain unlikely to protect themselves individually.

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Introduction

A recent report by the US Surgeon General confirmed that there is no risk-free level of exposure to second hand smoke (SHS); and that separating smokers from non-smokers, cleaning the air, and ventilating buildings cannot eliminate exposure of non-smokers to SHS (USDHHS, 2006).

Tobacco companies have lagged well behind medical and public health groups in their acknowledgment of evidence linking SHS to serious disease and have long been advocates of a "common courtesy" approach as an alternative to policies restricting or banning smoking in public places. In this approach, non-smokers are encouraged to politely communicate their preferences or any annoyance that smoke may cause to non-smokers (Davis et al., 1990). In 2006, British American Tobacco

Australia (BATA) maintained that "We believe that through practical solutions, common sense and courtesy, it is possible to accommodate all groups without the necessity of government intervention and outright bans" (BATA, 2006).

Surveys of American adults between 1974 and 1986 when restrictions on smoking were uncommon, indicated a small proportion of non-smokers would adopt the common courtesy approach, with only 4–6% saying they would ask a smoker to stop smoking (Davis et al., 1990). A population survey conducted in South Australia in 1993 found a comparable proportion of non-smokers (6%) would use this approach (Wakefield et al., 1995), even though the dangers of smoking were better known and smoke-free environments were more common than in 1974 when the original study was conducted. With several decades of progress in understanding the risks of SHS exposure and communicating them to the public, as well as increased restrictions on smoking in public places, it might be expected that non-smokers would be prepared to assert their preferences, especially if SHS exposure was a concern to them.

* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 3 9635 5380.

E-mail address: melanie.wakefield@cancervic.org.au (M. Wakefield).

Research has shown that with increases in smokefree environments, support for total smoking bans in public areas also strengthens (McAllister, 1995). A cross-national comparative study conducted in 2002 found that in Australia, following implementation of total smoking bans at indoor restaurants, there was strong public support (71%) for bans at these venues, while in the UK, Canada and the US - where smoking bans in restaurants were uncommon at that time - support for bans at indoor restaurants was below 30% (Borland et al., 2006).

In the state of Victoria, Australia, restrictions on smoking in public places are relatively comprehensive; smoking is banned in restaurants and shopping malls (since 2001), restricted in licensed bars and gambling venues (since 2002), 68% of indoor workers reported total smoking bans at work in 2003 (Germain and Findley, 2004), and public support for smokefree bars was 80% in 2005 (Germain, 2006). The aims of the present study were to assess the extent Victorian non-smokers would adopt the common courtesy approach and whether this behavior is higher among never smokers and/or those more concerned about exposure to SHS.

Method

The data presented in this study were taken from two representative population surveys of Victorians (aged 18 years and over), conducted by a market research company for the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer. Respondents were randomly sampled from the Electronic White Pages. The survey questions were asked as part of an 8–16 minute telephone interview about tobacco issues conducted in 2004 and 2005 (response rates were 49% and 55% respectively).

A standard tobacco use question (AIHW, 1999) was used to determine smoking status. Respondents were asked if they currently smoked cigarettes, cigars, pipes or any other tobacco products daily, at least weekly, less than weekly, or not at all. 'Never smokers' included respondents who reported they did not currently smoke and had not smoked 100 or more cigarettes in their lifetime ($N=3096$). 'Former smokers' included those who did not currently smoke, but said they had smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime ($N=1669$).

To assess respondents' level of concern about, and recent exposure to SHS, non-smokers were asked: 'Which of the following best describes your level of concern about being exposed to passive smoking? Are you...(not at all con-

cerned; somewhat concerned; very concerned?)'. Recent exposure was measured by asking: 'Thinking back over the last 48 hours, has anyone at all been smoking near you?'.

Based on questions developed by Wakefield et al. (1995), respondents were asked: 'Suppose you are in a public place and someone next to you asks if you mind whether they smoke. Which one of these would be your most likely response? (Say you don't mind and mean it; Say you don't mind, but wish they wouldn't smoke; Say you would prefer it if they did not smoke)'. They were also asked: 'Suppose you are in a public place and someone next to you just lights up a cigarette. Which one of these would be your most likely response? (Ask them to stop; Move away yourself; Do nothing)'.

Statistical analysis

Survey samples were combined for greater statistical power, and weighted by age and sex according to 2001 Census estimates of the Victorian population (ABS, 2003b). Similar to the Victorian population (ABS, 2003a), around 90% of respondents were born in either Australia, UK or Europe. To participate, it was required that respondents answer survey questions in English.

Binary logistic regression analyses examined differences between former and never smokers and level of concern about SHS exposure. Multinomial logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine whether smoking history (former vs. never smoker) and level of concern about exposure to SHS predicted: a) responses and; b) behaviors when exposed to SHS, controlling for age, sex, education, survey year and whether the respondent had been exposed to SHS in the past 48 hours.

Results

Behavior of non-smokers when exposed to SHS

If someone next to them lit up a cigarette in a public place, only 5.5% of non-smokers would adopt the common courtesy approach by asking the person to stop smoking (Table 1). The majority of non-smokers (74.7%) reported they would move away and 16.4% said they would do nothing. Consistent with our expectations, never smokers were more likely to ask the person to stop smoking ($OR\ 1.73, p<0.01$) and more likely to move away ($OR\ 1.40, p<0.001$), than to do nothing, compared to former smokers.

Table 1
Behavior of Victorian non-smokers when exposed to secondhand smoke: never and former smokers

	Total non-smokers ($N=4765$)	Former smoker ($n=1669$)	Never smoker ($n=3096$)	Never smoker vs Former smoker (Former smoker=ref)	
	%	%	%	Odds Ratio ^a	95% Confidence Intervals
Response to someone lighting up					
Do nothing (ref)	16.4	21.6	13.6	1	
Ask them to stop	5.5	4.6	6.0	1.73*	(1.25, 2.40)
Move away	74.7	69.7	77.4	1.40**	(1.17, 1.67)
Other (e.g. depends on situation, etc.)	3.3	4.0	2.9	1.04	(0.72, 1.50)
Response to someone asking to smoke					
Say you don't mind and mean it (ref)	18.7	27.7	13.9	1	
Say you don't mind, but wish they wouldn't	28.0	24.2	30.0	2.03**	(1.67, 2.46)
Say you would prefer it if they didn't smoke	48.8	42.8	52.1	2.25**	(1.88, 2.71)
Other (e.g. depends on environment)	4.5	5.2	4.1	1.64*	(1.19, 2.26)

* Significantly different compared with the reference category, $p<0.01$, two tailed.

** Significantly different compared with the reference category, $p<0.001$, two tailed.

^a Odds ratios represent the odds that a never smoker, compared to a former smoker, would act/respond in a certain way compared to the reference behavior/response (ref), adjusted for age, sex, education level, exposure to SHS in past 48 hours and survey year.

Survey data were collected in Victoria, Australia during November and December 2004 and 2005.

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