



The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre
Systems and solutions for better health

Standing up for...

'Nanny state' changes that save lives

Australia has a strong track record of developing and investing in programs that help people live healthier and longer lives.¹

Yet moves to encourage healthier lifestyles or prevent accidents are often criticised as 'nanny state' tactics – overbearing rules that impinge on personal freedoms.

This is nothing new. Attempts to improve public health have long been attacked for infringing civil liberties, from the first moves to clean up public water supplies in Victorian England to Australia's recent introduction of plain cigarette packaging.²

But once these so-called nanny state rules and regulations start, they save lives and become such a normal part of daily life that we take them for granted, as these case studies illustrate.

Seat belts

Car manufacturers started fitting seat belts in new Australian cars in the 1960s, but despite education campaigns most people were not wearing them. An ever-increasing road toll spurred the Victorian government to investigate solutions, with the evidence showing seat belts could reduce road deaths and injuries.³

In 1970, Victoria made it compulsory to wear seat belts if they were fitted in a car, a decision met with claims that the law infringed civil liberties.³

Yet the public quickly accepted the new rules and car design adapted to include seat belts in new models. Only a quarter of people in Melbourne wore seat belts before the law was introduced. One month in and half the community was belting up. Once police started prosecuting motorists for not wearing a belt, three-quarters of motorists were following the law.³

Victoria's road death toll fell 10% in the first year,⁴ a result that prompted the rest of Australia to make seat belts compulsory in 1972.

- In 1977 90% of people wore seat belts.⁵ By 2013, 97% of Australians reported wearing a belt when they travelled in the front seat.⁶
- The laws saved more than 4000 Australian lives from 1971–78.³
- Between 1965 and 2013, seat belts reduced Australia's road death toll by 67%.⁷



Seat belts
reduced
Australia's
road death toll
by two thirds
between
1965 and 2013

Investing in health

The 'nanny state' has helped to build a healthier Australia in many ways, including:²

- Childhood immunisation programs
- Bicycle and motorcycle helmet regulations
- Random breath testing
- Speed limits
- Shatterproof safety glass for showers
- Fire retardant children's nightwear
- Public smoking bans
- Minimum legal drinking age
- Mandatory smoke alarms
- SunSmart regulations in schools and childcare centres.

Random breath testing

Researchers started making the connection between alcohol consumption and car accidents in the 1960s and '70s, prompting road safety advocates to call for random breath testing to detect drunk drivers.⁸

Proposals to trial random breath testing in NSW in 1982 prompted the NSW Australian Hotels Association president to call the scheme "an unfair attack on responsible, sane drinking drivers who pose absolutely no danger on the road".⁹ The Australian Law Reform Commission argued that stopping and testing potentially innocent motorists was an invasion of individual rights.⁸

NSW forged ahead with a trial of random breath testing, which led to growing public support for testing.¹⁰ In 1982, 64% of people in NSW supported the proposals. A year later, with the program in place, 85% of people thought testing should continue. By 1987, there was almost unanimous support for random breath testing and record levels of people were willing to label a drunk driver who crashes or is stopped by police as "irresponsible, a criminal, or a potential murderer".¹⁰

- There was a 48% reduction in fatal crashes in the first four and a half months of the program operating¹¹
- There was an average 15% reduction annually in fatal crashes over the following 10 years¹¹
- NSW Police estimate 7000 lives were saved in the first 30 years of RBT programs.¹²

Plain cigarette packaging

Tobacco is the greatest cause of ill health and death in Australia and each year smoking kills 15,000 Australians.¹³ Australia's considerable success in reducing smoking rates is a result of the combination of health promotion, such as Quitlines, and legislative changes, including restrictions on smoking in work places, hotels, banning advertising and taxation.¹⁴

In a bid to make smoking less attractive and to increase the prominence of on-pack health warnings, the Federal Government ruled cigarettes must have plain packaging from late 2012. The tobacco industry and some sections of the public strongly opposed the measure. Tobacco companies accused the Federal Government of infringing their trademark rights, and launched legal action.

Less than a third of smokers initially supported the measures. However a year after the laws were introduced, almost half of smokers supported plain packaging, outweighing the 34.7% who remained opposed.¹⁵

Researchers said the finding was significant, showing how "a world-first untested law had become widely accepted".¹⁶

Latest evidence suggests plain packaging laws are reducing the appeal of cigarette packs, particularly to adolescents and young people.¹⁷ There are also suggestions the changes are encouraging smokers to think about quitting and make attempts to give up cigarettes:

- Calls to the NSW and ACT Quitline increased by 78% four weeks after plain packaging was introduced.¹⁸
- Smokers surveyed a year after the new packs were introduced were more likely to conceal their packs from view, stub out their cigarettes prematurely and try to quit.¹⁹



Random breath testing saved 7000 lives in the 30 years after it was introduced



Calls to Quitlines increased by 78% four weeks after plain packaging was introduced

References

1. Australian National Preventive Health Agency (ANPHA). State of Preventive Health 2013. Report to the Australian Government Minister for Health. Canberra; ANPHA, 2013.
2. Chapman S. One hundred and fifty ways the nanny state is good for us. *The Conversation*. 2 July 2013. Available from <https://theconversation.com/one-hundred-and-fifty-ways-the-nanny-state-is-good-for-us-15587>
3. Milne PW. Fitting and wearing of seatbelts in Australia: The history of a successful countermeasure, Canberra. 1985 Available from https://infrastructure.gov.au/roads/safety/publications/1985/pdf/belt_analysis_4.pdf
4. Wright J. Buckled to History. *Motoring.com.au*. 7 August 2010. Available from <http://www.motoring.com.au/buckled-to-history-21137/>
5. McDermott FT, Hough DE. Reduction in road fatalities and injuries after legislation for compulsory wearing of seat belts: experience in Victoria and the rest of Australia. *Br J Surg* 1979; 66(7): 518-21.
6. Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development. Community Attitudes to Road Safety – 2013 Survey Report, April, Canberra. 2014. Available from https://infrastructure.gov.au/roads/safety/publications/2013/pdf/community_att_13.pdf
7. Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics. Impact of road trauma and measures to improve outcomes, Report 140, December, Canberra. 2014. Available from https://bitre.gov.au/publications/2014/files/report_140.pdf
8. Davis T. Milestones: Breath testing goes random. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 3 May 2014. Available from <http://www.drive.com.au/motor-news/milestones-breath-testing-goes-random-20140501-371cg.html>
9. Dowling J. Long road but RBT is now a part of life. *The Daily Telegraph*. 20 November 2012. Available from <http://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/long-road-but-rbt-is-now-a-part-of-life/story-fndo4bst-1226519897740>
10. Homel R. Crime on the Roads: Drinking and driving. In Vernon, J (Ed), *Alcohol and crime* (pp 67–82). 1990. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. Available from http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/27309/58787_1.pdf?sequence=1
11. Henstridge J, Homel R, Mackay P. The long-term effects of random breath testing in four Australia States: A time series analysis, April, Canberra. 1997. Available from https://infrastructure.gov.au/roads/safety/publications/1997/pdf/alc_random.pdf
12. Transport for NSW. Operation Paciullo launched as part of the RBT's 30th Anniversary. 20 November 2012. Available from <http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/operation-paciullo-launched-part-rbts-30th-anniversary>
13. Collins D, Lapsley H. The costs of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse to Australian society in 2004–05. Canberra: Department of Health and Ageing; 2008.
14. Australian Government Department of Health. Tobacco control key facts and figures. Smoking prevalence rates for 14 years or older and key tobacco control measures implemented in Australia since 1990. Available from: <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/tobacco-kff>
15. Swift E, Borland R, Cummings K, Fong G, McNeill A, Hammond D et al. Australian smokers' support for plain or standardised packs before and after implementation: findings from the ITC Four Country Survey. *Tob Control*. 2015; 24(6): 616–621.
16. Desloires V. More smokers support plain packaging an international tobacco control survey shows. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 11 November 2014. Available from <http://www.smh.com.au/national/more-smokers-support-plain-packaging-an-international-tobacco-control-survey-shows-20141111-11kiac.html>
17. White V, Williams T, Wakefield, M. Has the introduction of plain packaging with larger graphic health warnings changed adolescents' perceptions of cigarette packs and brands? *Tob Control* 2015;24:ii42–ii49
18. Young J, Stacey I, Dobbins T, Dunlop S, Dessaix A, Currow D. Association between tobacco plain packaging and Quitline calls: A population-based, interrupted time-series analysis. *Med J Aust* 2014;200(1):29–32.
19. Durkin S, Brennan E, Coomber K, Zacher M, Scollo M, Wakefield M. Short-term changes in quitting-related cognitions and behaviours after the implementation of plain packaging with larger health warnings: Findings from a national cohort study with Australian adult smokers. *Tob Control* 2015;24:ii26–ii32



This factsheet was prepared
by The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre

Writer: Rebecca Jenkins

Editor: Marge Overs

Reviewed by: Professor Annette
Braunack-Mayer,

University of Adelaide

Contact us:

Tel: (02) 9188 9520

Email: [preventioncentre@
saxinstitute.org.au](mailto:preventioncentre@saxinstitute.org.au)

Website: preventioncentre.org.au