Increased Smoker Recognition of a National Quitline Number Following Introduction of Improved Pack Warnings

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Introduction

Some countries require health warnings on tobacco packaging to include telephone numbers for quitlines (cessation helplines) [1]. We examined how recognition of a quitline number changed after new warnings were introduced in New Zealand (NZ).

Methods

The NZ arm of the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Survey (ITC Project) has surveyed adult smokers in two waves (n=1376 and n=923) one year apart (with wave 2 in 2008/early 2009). Wave 1 respondents were exposed to text-only warnings on tobacco packaging; these featured a telephone number but did not indicate this was the national "Quitline" number. Wave 2 respondents were exposed to new graphic health warnings (GHWs). The GHWs on the back of the packet included the word "Quitline" beside the number, as well as a cessation message featuring both the number and "Quitline" wording. We examined responses from participants who completed both surveys to explore whether recognition of the Quitline number differed over time. Further details of the methods (including response rates, attrition and weighting processes) are available in online reports [2].

Results

The introduction of the new GHWs was associated with a 24% between-wave increase in recognition of the Quitline number on packs (from 37% to 61%, p<0.001). Recognition increased from a minority of respondents to a majority for all: age groups, genders, deprivation levels (using small area and individual measures), financial stress (2 measures), and ethnic groups (eg, see Figures 1 & 2).

The statistically significant difference in recognition between the European/Other group and Asians present in wave 1 was eliminated in wave 2 (Figure 1). The increase between the waves was lowest in the most deprived quintile (p<0.001), though this group had the highest level of recognition at baseline (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Unprompted recognition of the quitline number on tobacco packaging by NZ smokers (before and after improved pack warnings) by ethnic group*
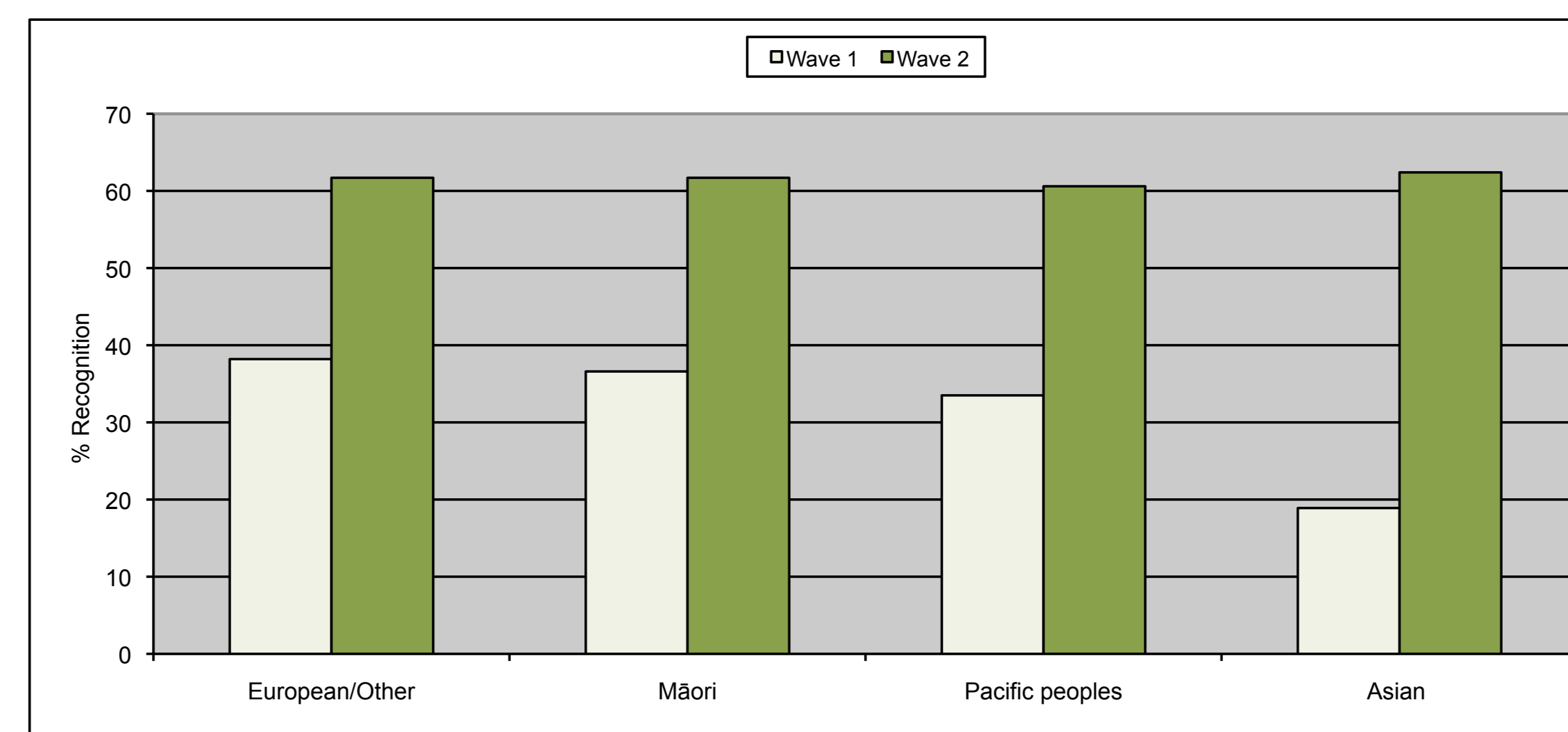
*All results weighted and adjusted for the complex survey design to represent the national population of smokers.

Figure 2: Unprompted recognition of the quitline number by socio-economic status (small area deprivation measure)*
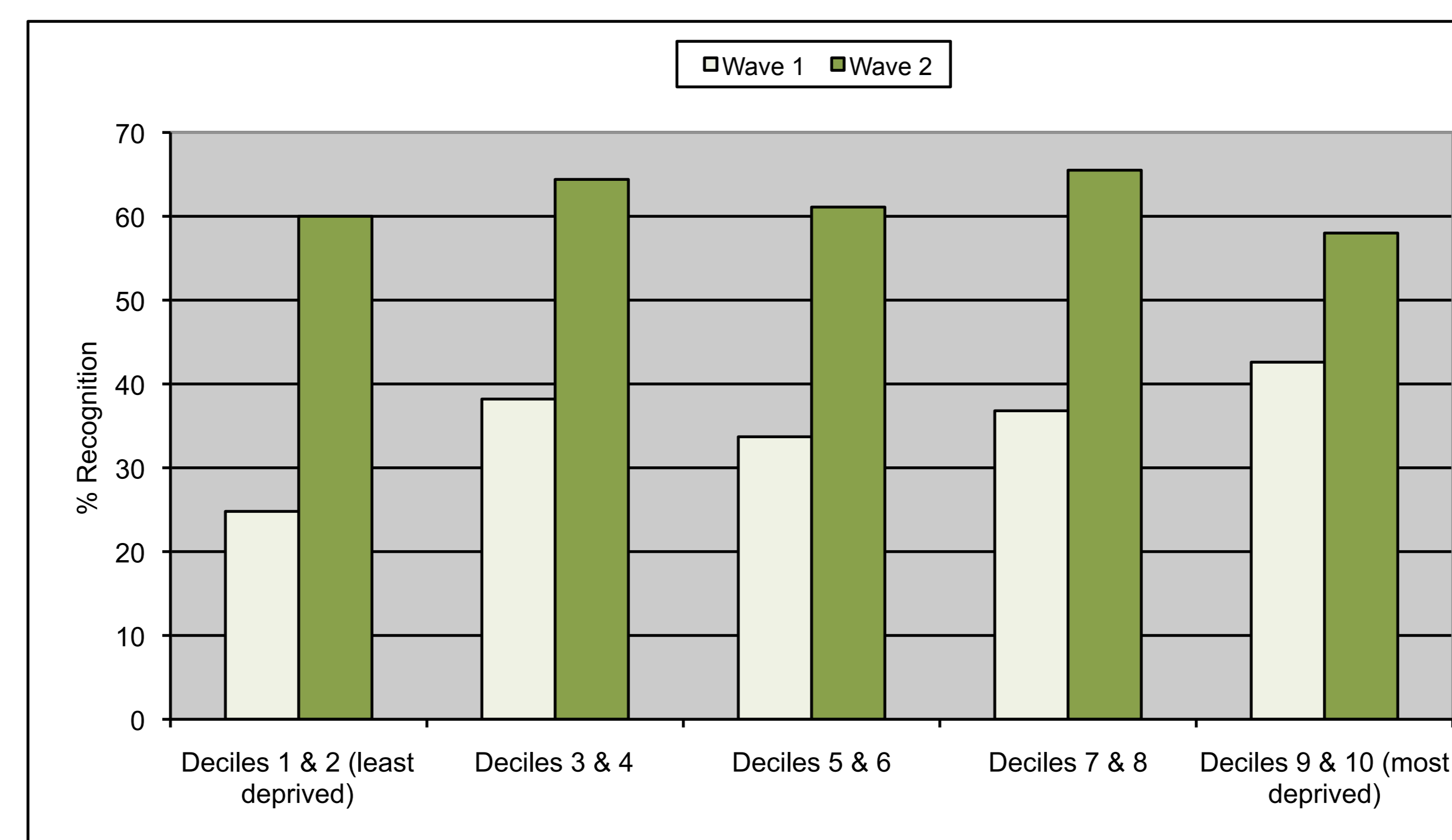
* See Figure 1 for more details.

Figure 3: Examples of new graphic health warnings in New Zealand (back-of-the-pack) with Quitline information and contrasted with an Australian pack (far right) which has a larger Quitline number (all photos life-size)

Discussion

This study illustrates the value of featuring prominent and clearly identified quitline numbers on cigarette packs, a finding consistent with previously published studies. Importantly, this simple intervention benefits all socio-demographic and ethnic groups. These results should encourage policymakers to require that all tobacco packaging features quitline numbers in visually prominent positions and alongside a specific smoking cessation message.

However, in this NZ study almost 40% of smokers still did not recall that the Quitline number was on tobacco packs, suggesting there is further scope for improvement. Possible improvements for NZ include placing the Quitline number on the more visible part of the pack (ie, front-of-the-pack), improving the readability of the Quitline message and reducing visual clutter in GHWs in current use (see Figure 3)[3].

References

[1] Physicians for a Smoke-free Canada. http://www.smoke-free.ca/warnings/default.htm
[2] See an Online Methods Report by Wilson and 2 reports by Clark at: http://www.wnmeds.ac.nz/itcproject.html
[3] Wilson et al. Lessons from New Zealand's introduction of graphic health warnings on tobacco packaging [Poster]. SRNT, 16th Annual Meeting, 24-27 February 2010, Baltimore, USA