Knowledge of Ontario's Tobacco Control Act in the Community of Scarborough

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Ontario's Tobacco Control Act (TCA), 1994, states that it is against the law to sell or supply cigarettes to anyone under the age of 19. In the Scarborough community to date, 120 charges have been laid under the TCA demonstrating that, despite education and enforcement, some retailers continue to sell to minors. The "Not To Kids" campaign was developed in partnership with community agencies and the business sector to decrease youth tobacco access through a community-based social marketing and education campaign. Four pre-test data collection initiatives were undertaken to support the development and evaluation of the campaign. These included a youth survey, a retailer survey, compliance checks and a community telephone survey. The purpose of the community telephone survey was to assess the community's knowledge about selling and supplying cigarettes to minors and reporting offences under the TCA. Although a number of studies have assessed retailer awareness of tobacco control laws,^{1,2} to our knowledge, this type of community survey has not been previously conducted. The data generated provided the framework for the development of educational messages and community mobilization strategies.

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METHODS

A questionnaire was developed to determine individual awareness of youth access to tobacco and the provincial legislation. The questionnaire was pretested on both Health Department staff and community members. An independent research firm was contracted to conduct telephone interviews using a random digit dialling technique from a sampling pool of all Scarborough residential telephone numbers. Calls were made by trained interviewers during June 1997 to generate a minimum sample of 400 responses. This sample size is accurate plus or minus 5% with a corresponding confidence level of 95%. To enhance the random nature of the sample, the person in each household who was 19 years of age or older and whose birthday came next at the time of the call was interviewed. The data were entered and analyzed using Epi-Info software (v. 6.02).³ Fleiss quadratic 95% confidence intervals were calculated for all proportions. Qualitative data were analyzed using Q.S.R. NUD-IST Power version (v. 3.0.4d).⁴

RESULTS

Call disposition and sample size

A total of 1,978 calls were placed. Contact was made with 987 individuals. A response rate of 41% generated 403 completed interviews.

Demographics

Demographic characteristics of the sample including age, sex and smoking status were compared to data from the 1996 Census⁵ and the 1990 Ontario Health Survey.⁶ It was determined that these characteristics were consistent with those of Scarborough's larger population.

Knowledge of the Tobacco Control Act

When asked, "How old does a person have to be to be sold tobacco in Ontario?", 44% of respondents correctly answered "19" (Figure 1). If respondents stated an age other than 19 on the first question, they were informed by the interviewer that the correct age to be sold tobacco was 19. When asked "Do you think it is against the law for a person under 19 to buy tobacco?", only 10% of respondents correctly answered "no".

Figure 2. Reasons respondents would not report tobacco sales to minors

When asked "Do you think it is against the law for a friend or a stranger to give tobacco to a person under the age of 19?", 76% correctly answered "yes". Ten percent of respondents reported that they had been approached by a young person to buy cigarettes for them in the past six months. Among those who had been asked, only 10% did buy cigarettes for the youth. Among those who had not been approached, 3% stated that they would buy cigarettes for youth if they were asked.

Support for the Tobacco Control Act

Less than half of respondents (48%) stated that they would report a store selling tobacco to a person who looked under 19. Only 12% of those who would report, knew that the correct location to report to was the local health department. The majority (65%) stated that they would report to the police. Among the 36% of respondents who said they would not report a sale to youth, over half (53%) stated apathy as the reason (Figure 2).

Responses included: "I don't care", "It's none of my business" and "It's not my concern". The majority of all respondents (78%) felt that the issue of some Scarborough stores selling tobacco to underage youth was either very or fairly serious.

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey demonstrate that the community has limited knowledge of the TCA. Although the majority of respondents believed that youth access to tobacco was a serious issue, less than half were willing to report a sale. In addition, most respondents were not aware of the appropriate place to report a sale. Furthermore, as stores stop selling tobacco to youth, kids are asking individuals to buy cigarettes for them. One quarter of those surveyed did not know that this is against the law.

This study shows that the predominant reason that the general public is reluctant

to report sales to minors is apathy. The question remains: Why are parents reluctant to report vendors when their children come home with cigarettes? Is it because of the misconception that their child has broken the law? Further studies are required to answer these questions.

The data from this survey were used in the planning and implementation of "Not to Kids", a broad-based social marketing campaign designed to educate the community about the TCA. A post-campaign community telephone survey is planned for June 1998 to evaluate the campaign's success.

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