



WARNING SIGN: *Parliament gets tougher on tobacco. Photo: Thinkstock*

ADVERTISING

Net ban on tobacco promotion

New measures to combat smoking.

A bill to tackle one of the leading causes of preventable death and disease in Australia has won the full support of MPs united by a desire to reduce the health burden associated with cigarette smoking.

The Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Amendment Bill 2010 will make it an offence to advertise tobacco products on the internet and in other electronic media such as mobile phones and computers, unless the advertising complies with state, territory or Commonwealth regulations.

Cigarettes are currently heavily promoted on the internet, which is largely unregulated, and very few websites advertising tobacco contain even the most basic health warning.

Speaking in support of the bill, Craig Thomson (Dobell, NSW) described tobacco advertising on a video sharing website as prolific and accessible, frequently associating smoking with glamorous and alternative lifestyles and with images of attractive young males and females.

“Only 11 per cent of the sites examined contained health warnings,” Mr Thomson told the House.

“Our internet legislation will mean that online sales, advertising and promotion of tobacco will now be subject to the same kinds of restrictions that are placed on over-the-counter sales,” he said.

“Together with our efforts to mandate plain packaging of tobacco products from 2012, Australia is on track to have the world’s toughest measures against tobacco.”

Since advertising bans were introduced in the mid-1970s, the number of smokers has steadily declined, yet more than 3 million Australians still smoke. The highest rates of smoking are found among younger Australians, especially those aged between 24 and 29, the Indigenous population, and people on low incomes.

He said tobacco related disease kills around 15,000 Australians a year and is estimated to cost the economy 31 billion dollars a year.

Advertising, he said, is partly to blame.

“It has been proven through much research and by way of a range of studies and gathering of facts and figures that tobacco advertising does encourage people to smoke, especially younger Australians.

“Therefore, we must do everything we can to limit the opportunities tobacco marketers have to increase the sales of their products through the new media, mainly via the internet, on social networking sites, and through personal communication devices such as mobile phones.”

Outlining the opposition’s support for the bill, Andrew Southcott (Boothby, SA) said it is important to focus on preventative health.

“Approximately a third of Australia’s burden of disease is attributable to modifiable risk factors, and tobacco smoking is one of the leading causes of preventable chronic disease amongst Australians,”

Dr Southcott said.

“The National Preventative Health Taskforce identified that tobacco is currently the single biggest preventable cause of death and disease in Australia. Over 3 million people – that is, approximately 18 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and over – still smoke, with 2.9 million people smoking on a daily basis. About half of these smokers who smoke for prolonged periods will die early.”

Dr Southcott said almost one in five pregnant women report smoking during pregnancy, including 42 per cent of teenagers and 54 per cent of Indigenous women, with long-lasting and far-reaching effects on their offspring.

“This legislation makes it an offence to advertise tobacco products on the internet and in other electronic media. By restricting internet advertising of tobacco products in Australia, this goes some way to targeting smoking and its harmful effects.”

The federal government has set a target of reducing the national smoking rate to just 10 per cent of the population by 2018, and said this bill follows a 25 per cent excise increase announced in April last year, record investment in anti-smoking social marketing campaigns, and legislation to mandate plain packaging of tobacco products. ●