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Published in:
Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health

DOI:
[10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100029)

Published: 01/04/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Gartner, C., Perusco, A., Puljević, C., Morphet, K., & Hefler, M. (2023). International progress toward a commercial tobacco endgame is an opportunity for advancing tobacco control in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 47(2), 100029. Article 100029. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100029>

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International progress toward a commercial tobacco endgame is an opportunity for advancing tobacco control in Australia

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Submitted: 29 August 2022; Revision requested: 25 October 2022; Accepted: 27 November 2022

We read with interest the paper by Jongenelis on challenges and opportunities to tobacco control in Australia, published in *ANZJPH*.¹ While Australia has a history of tobacco control policy innovation, we agree that currently “policy reform in Australia [has] fallen behind best practice.”¹ Once considered a tobacco control leader, Australia only ranks 12th for lowest smoking prevalence globally.² Internationally, the tobacco control field is moving to a focus on endgame policies, which move beyond incremental expansion of existing measures to approaches that aim to rapidly and permanently reduce smoking to minimal levels by addressing the fundamental drivers of the tobacco epidemic, namely the widespread commercial retailing of an addictive product whose contents are minimally regulated.^{3,4}

The New Zealand government (NZG) has recently introduced a Bill to parliament to implement three endgame policies: a reduced nicotine content standard for cigarettes, a reduction in the number of tobacco retailers and a smoke-free/tobacco-free generation law.⁵ Notably, adoption of endgame strategies has given the NZG confidence in being able to achieve their <5% prevalence target for both Māori and non-Māori populations by 2025,⁶ while Australia’s target for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is 27% by 2030.⁷ Other jurisdictions around the world have also introduced or are considering, endgame policies, including a tobacco-free generation law (Malaysia, and cities in the Philippines and the United States), banning supermarket sales (the Netherlands), and ending all tobacco sales (cities in the United States).^{8,9}

The Australian tobacco control field has contributed research and advocacy on a range of ambitious policy proposals including a regulated tobacco market,¹⁰ a tobacco purchase licence,¹¹ phasing out general tobacco retailing,¹² regulating cigarettes to reduce addictiveness,¹³ a smoke-free/tobacco-free generation law,¹⁴ and raising the minimum purchase age to 21 or 25 years.¹⁵ Australian research has found that phasing out tobacco sales and a tobacco-free generation law are policies with substantial public support.^{16–18} Furthermore, it is notable that the attempt to introduce a smoke-free/tobacco-free generation law in Tasmania was a world first. Australia also has an NHMRC-funded Centre of Research Excellence on Achieving the Tobacco Endgame, which is researching a range of

commercial tobacco endgame policies to expand the Australian evidence base.¹⁹

We share the concern that “the attention being devoted to e-cigarettes [is] diverting resources away from evidence-based measures to reduce smoking,”¹ the leading risk factor for preventable premature death in Australia.²⁰ While Australia has among the most restrictive regulatory approaches to e-cigarettes in the world, a curious political timidity is evident when it comes to regulating regular cigarettes, with no new tobacco policy innovations since plain packaging was introduced a decade ago.

An additional benefit of tobacco policy innovation is greater overall government investment in tobacco control. Australia’s plain packaging innovation was supported by record investment in mass media campaigns, tax excise increases, and the Tackling Indigenous Smoking program. The NZG is also investing in health promotion and smoking cessation programs alongside endgame policies.⁶ With a new National Tobacco Strategy being finalised, we hope that Australia will join international efforts to accelerate the tobacco endgame and show the type of policy audacity previously seen with plain packaging.⁸ The growing international discussion of a commercial tobacco endgame is paving the way for bold policies that could finally end the inequities caused by smoking by addressing the “structural, political and social dynamics that sustain the tobacco epidemic”²¹ and brings into focus “that ‘quitting smoking’ is the job of governments, not only of individuals who smoke.”²¹

Conflict of interest

The authors are affiliated with the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence on Achieving the Tobacco Endgame (NHMRC GNT1198301).

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