December 3, 2010

Send via FAX (613-941-6900)

The Right Honorable Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2
Canada

Re: Enhanced health warning labels on tobacco packages

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

On behalf of the North American Quitline Consortium (NAQC), I am writing to congratulate you on Canada’s leadership and stellar progress on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, and to ask for your action on another important tobacco issue: enhanced health warning labels on tobacco packages in Canada. We were very disappointed to learn that the regulatory process has come to a standstill in Canada and urge you to help move it forward!

As you may know, a quitline is a health service that offers telephone support – information, counseling, medication and other support – for people who want to quit using tobacco. Quitlines exist in all 10 Canadian provinces, Nunavut and Yukon, as well as all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and Mexico. NAQC is a learning organization that aims to maximize the access, use and effectiveness of quitlines; provide leadership and a unified voice to promote quitlines; and offer a forum to link those interested in quitline operations. NAQC is comprised of over 400 quitline professionals at provincial and state health departments, quitline service provider organizations, research institutes and national organizations in Canada and the United States. Three members of NAQC’s board of directors, copied on this letter, are Canadians.

In June of this year, 11 tobacco control leaders in Canada wrote to Minister Aglukkaq urging rapid action to implement enhanced health warning labels on tobacco packages. Their argument was simple: 1) a delay in implementation of the new warning labels will cost lives; 2) new messages and a much larger warning label are needed to enhance the effectiveness of the label; 3) addition of a toll-free quitline number and a web address would assist smokers in quitting; and 4) tobacco industry interference in health regulations should not be tolerated. NAQC supports the letter sent by these leaders and joins them in urging rapid action by the government. The time to act is now.
Recognizing that NAQC has a special expertise in quitlines, I would like to dedicate the rest of my letter to the issue of including a toll-free number for quitlines along with a web address as part of the health warning label.

According to the literature, warning labels on cigarettes and other tobacco products communicate the risks of smoking and have excellent recall with smokers. Literature also demonstrates that smokers who perceive greater smoking-related health hazards are more likely to consider quitting and to quit successfully. However, NAQC believes that health warning labels should require more than the communication of risks and hazards. We believe that actionable information should be provided to smokers and other tobacco users on how to receive help with quitting. Such a requirement will advance the use of labels and capitalize on the network of provincial and territorial quitlines that exists throughout Canada. Increased awareness of quitlines will result in a significant public health benefit by encouraging tobacco users to think about quitting and linking those who want to quit with effective no-cost services.

This recommendation is feasible for the tobacco industry. Approximately 20 nations currently require a quitline number on their tobacco package labeling. In addition, Philip Morris included the pan-U.S. quitline number (1-800-QUIT-NOW) as part of its Quitline Telephone Number on Cigarette Packages yielded more calls to the quitline than TV advertising. In a recent study of seven EU countries, the findings showed an increased call volume to quitlines in the first and second year after the quitline number appeared on the label. In the EU, the quitline telephone number appeared only on every 14th cigarette package, but still had a significant impact on calls to the quitline. During the first year, the mean increase in call volumes was 100% (range from 50-232%) and in the second year, the mean increase was 76% (range from -43 to 184%). The EU data were not adequate to predict the increase in call volume in Canada, but based on recent experience with quitline campaigns, NAQC believes placing a toll-free number on tobacco packages in Canada will more than double call volumes in the first year. The impact is likely to exceed an additional 50,000 calls to the quitlines each year.

Recently, The U.S. Food and Drug Administration began a regulatory process to enhance tobacco health warning labels in the U.S. Much of the impetus for moving forward in the U.S. was based on Canada’s leadership on this issue. We had anticipated that the U.S. enhancements (including addition of a toll-free number for quitlines) would be completed just after Canada’s. Now, it looks as though the U.S. may move ahead of Canada on this issue. It would be a tragedy for North America if only the U.S. implemented enhanced tobacco health warning labels.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. If you have questions regarding this letter, or if NAQC can be of any assistance, please contact me at (602)
279-2719, extension 7, or by e-mail at lbailey@naquitline.org. I wish you the best for your tenure in office.

Sincerely,

Linda A. Bailey
President and CEO

cc: The Honorable Leona Aglukkaq, PC, MP
Minister of Health

Ms. Penny Thomsen
NAQC Board Chair
Retired CEO, Canadian Cancer Society, Ontario

Dr. Sharon Campbell
NAQC Board Member
Research Associate Professor, University of Waterloo

Mr. Paul Lapierre
NAQC Board Secretary
Vice President Public Affairs & Cancer Control, Canadian Cancer Society

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9 Bot S et al. (2007). Impact of Telephone Numbers on Cigarette Packets on Call Volumes to Quitlines. STIVORO: der Haag, the Netherlands.