Tobacco giants’ cash incentives under fire

Health Ministry launches probe into rebates used to encourage retailers

by Martin Johnston

The Ministry of Health is investigating the rebates tobacco companies pay retailers to stock their products.

The ministry told the Herald yesterday it would investigate “the issue of tobacco companies providing incentives to retailers to sell and display tobacco.”

At Wednesday’s meeting of Parliament’s health select committee, the Association of Convenience Stores told MPs retailers received “standard trade rebates” from tobacco companies.

The ministry said: “Section 28(2) of the Smoke-free Environments Act (1990) bans any gift or cash rebate as an inducement or reward to any retailer for the purchase, sale, advertising or placement of tobacco products.

The association’s statement to MPs was confirmed by committee chairman Sue Edgley, the Cancer Society’s action on smoking and health (Aash), and the association’s executive director, David Killeen.

But association chairman Bryn Taylor said the society and Aash had taken the presentation out of context.

And in an apparent contradiction of the ministry’s view, Mr Killeen said: “The act does not allow cash rebates. We are not talking about incentives to put (tobacco products) in particular positions.”

He said the rebates tobacco companies paid to retailers were the same as those paid by confectionery suppliers.

“If you agree to sell so many brands of their product, they give you certain rebates... The rebate is associated with the decision to purchase a particular brand. It’s nothing to do with display,”

He acknowledged that tobacco advertising was not permitted, but said displays were not advertising.

The committee was hearing submissions on a petition calling for retail tobacco displays to be banned.

“The ministry, separately, is considering proposals to ban the displays, add further restrictions short of a ban, or simply enhance education and enforcement of the current law,”

Mr Killeen said changes to put tobacco out of customers’ sight would cost $900,000 to $1,000,000 at each store and could frustrate shoppers unable to find the brand they wanted quickly.

THE ASSOCIATION

- The Association of Convenience Stores represents more than 700 businesses.
- Its members are mostly convenience stores associated with petrol companies.
- A number of product suppliers are also “pioneer” members, including Imperial Tobacco, British American Tobacco, Philip Morris and Cadbury.

Waltzing yesterday, is drawn from a wider Aash smoking survey of 29,000 Year 10 students. It looked at their visits to stores with tobacco displays and their risk of taking up smoking.

Comparing students who visited stores daily with those who visited less than weekly, the study found that the likelihood of experimenting with smoking was almost tripled. Visiting twice or three times a week doubled the likelihood of trying smoking.

The 2007 Aash survey found that 12.6 per cent smoked at least monthly and 7.3 per cent were daily smokers.

- Martin Johnston

WALL TO WALL: MPs are debating whether cigarette displays should be banned.

Colour alerts birds to foreign eggs

by Angela Gregory

Some birds are skilled at detecting imposters’ eggs in their nests because they recognize that the shell colour is suspect, says an international research team that included New Zealand scientists.

The researchers — from the University of Auckland, the University of Birmingham and two Czech institutions, the Academy of Sciences and the Palacky University — suggest that some birds use colour to identify eggs of other species and eject them.

Dr Mark Huber, of Auckland University’s School of Biological Sciences, said the research showed song thrushes recognized small changes, particularly in ultraviolet wavelengths, and used these to distinguish between their own eggs and eggs of “parasitic” species such as cuckoos.

‘“Birds have very different visual senses to humans — they can see ultraviolet wavelengths where we cannot.”

He said the study introduced eggs painted in a range of colours from blue to orange to rainbow to black to white and orange to brown to black.

The birds rejected the eggs that showed differences in the reflecting of ultraviolet or short (blue) wavelength light.

Dr Huber said birds such as cuckoos which parasitically introduced their eggs into the nest of other birds dramatically increased the amount of time and energy needed to provision the nest.

He said that even though the artificially coloured eggs had come from the female song thrushes, the birds still ejected them because of subtle differences from their natural colouring.

The research was published online this week in Biology Letters.

Dr Huber told the Herald that previous research had looked into the way birds perceived colours in feathers, fruits and insects, but not eggs.

It was suspected that birds could recognise healthy eggs by their colour.

An antioxidant, biliverdin, was responsible for blue-coloured eggs and it was thought the brighter the blue the more likely the egg would produce a healthy chick.

Dr Huber said it was possible birds could evolve less healthy-looking eggs to increase survival rates.