

12. Is Ruddock keeping the home fires burning?

By Simon Chapman, professor of public health at the University of Sydney and editor of the British Medical Journal's Tobacco Control journal

Some [20 Australians](#) a year lose their lives to fires caused by cigarettes each year. Many others suffer hideous burns. Four US states – New York, California, Vermont, Illinois – and Canada have all legislated to make reduced ignition propensity or "RIP" cigarettes mandatory. These are cigarettes which meet a laboratory test standard where 75% of a test sample will self-extinguish before burning down to the end. The standard is met either by adding paper "speed bumps" to the cigarette or by removing citrate, a burn accelerant, in cigarette paper. Roll-your-own cigarette paper does not contain [citrate](#), and every rollie smoker knows how their cigarettes often need re-lighting.

In March 2005, Australia's fire chiefs and all state emergency services ministers unanimously called for RIP cigarette legislation to be fast-tracked. Standards Australia has now released for public comment a draft standard largely mirroring the New York model. Philip Ruddock, the federal minister at the table, has been the lone dissenter, issuing a [press release](#) hosing down the urgency and calling for more research. In late August this year he took the trouble to correct a *Sydney Morning Herald* report which said he supported the standard, saying instead he supported preventing tobacco-caused fire deaths, which is code for education instead of legislation.

None of the three major tobacco companies operating in Australia has voluntarily introduced RIP cigarettes, despite climbing over each other to demonstrate newly acquired "corporate responsibility". British American Tobacco, which earlier this year was ranked eight in Australia's Corporate Responsibility Index, has openly [opposed the proposal](#). In the USA, all companies, except Philip Morris, have lobbied against the legislation because they fear it advantages Philip Morris which is ahead of the other companies in being able to supply cigarettes which meet the standard.

The companies have two additional private concerns. They know that smokers don't like the products because they can self-extinguish when left smouldering in an ashtray. In a recent study published in [Tobacco Control](#), New York smokers were three times more likely than smokers in other US states to report that their cigarettes sometimes went out while being smoked. The companies fear this will add yet another reason to a smoker's reluctance to keep smoking. Next, internal [industry documents](#) show that the companies are nervous about litigation. Because they have known of the problem for years and have been able to manufacture RIP cigarettes, their refusal to do so earlier could see burnt litigants suing for their failure to take reasonable steps to assure duty of care.

In apparent lock-step, British American Tobacco and Ruddock have both publicly questioned whether RIP cigarettes might "encourage irresponsible disposal" through smokers believing they cannot start fires. This is analogous to arguments that were once used against seat belts and crash helmets where interest groups argued that drivers would throw caution to the wind and drive more recklessly. Home fires are often caused when intoxicated or elderly smokers nod off with a lighted cigarette. There is no education program in the world that can influence such situations. Neither is there a shred of evidence that responsible butt disposal education campaigns work.

Ruddock and BAT have also questioned the "real world" effectiveness of the laboratory standard, arguing that we should all wait to see what happens to the number of cigarette-caused fires in the North American legislated areas. This is apparently reasonable concern is deceptively misleading. Statistics for any phenomenon from the weather to disease incidence can bounce up and down in any given year. New York has reported a 30% fall in cigarette caused fire deaths in the first full year after its legislation was implemented. But it would be premature to herald such an early figure as demonstrating the effectiveness of the legislation. The BAT-Ruddock argument will require years to pass before any biostatistician would be satisfied that any downward trend was real and not within natural variation.

All consumer safety standards are set to laboratory standardised conditions. BAT actively supports and uses

such a standard itself in testing tar and nicotine yields. It has been over two years since I and SBS journalist Antony Balmain produced a [detailed report](#) for the Commonwealth Health Department on the issue. The glacial pace of subsequent developments seems sure to keep the home and bush fires burning.