ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION: HOW TOBACCO WARNING LABELS CHANGE PUBLIC OPINION ON TOBACCO AS THE LEADING CAUSE OF CANCER AMONG RURAL AND URBAN CULTURES OF TOBACCO SHARING.

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**Introduction:** Researches across the world and India have reported tobacco as the leading cause of cancer and cancer deaths. However, that is not the opinion many rural citizens agreed upon. For the rural population, tobacco consumption has been linked with social status and commensality. Tobacco consumption is associated with different symbolic and often moral overtones across all societies. The habit of rural men, usually assembled in caste-based or social class-based groups, sharing smoking and non-smoking forms of tobacco in daily gatherings, is an example of fellowship, communal living, and solidarity. The use of tobacco by women is often considered, by different sections of society, in ways different from that of men. Among urban women, the greater use of smokeless tobacco by women is associated with fewer stigmas compared to smoking. As traditional values slacken their strong hold in rural societies and are rapidly substituted by modern codes of behavior in urban societies, the socio-cultural influences that encourage or discourage tobacco use are altering. The differences between public opinion on tobacco as a leading cause of cancer across rural and urban population is determined largely by the differences in media these populations are exposed to.

**Methodology:** A sample of 100 cancer patients was selected from Mizoram State Cancer Institute, Aizawl. These selected samples are adults who have come to the hospital for treatments. Another sample of 100 adults was selected from Aizawl, which is the urban center of the state. Opinions on the belief that tobacco is the leading cause of cancer were obtained through careful and brief interviews with samples. Opinions were then compared between rural and urban adults. Changes in opinions among rural cancer patients, before and after being exposed to tobacco warning labels that have images campaigning against the use of tobacco, were also measured.

**Results:** Before being exposed to tobacco warning labels, ninety eight per cent of rural cancer patients do not accept tobacco as the direct cause of cancer. Ninety two per cent of patients from villages opine that cancer happens by misfortune and has nothing to do with a person’s diet, lifestyle, and consumption of tobacco. However, 88 per cent of samples from the state capital hold the belief that smoking and non-smoking forms of tobacco are directly responsible for tobacco related cancers. Eighty three per cent of rural cancer patients reported that tobacco warning labels are true but late; as they have already been diagnosed with cancer and are on cessation by the time they are exposed to these warning labels. Warning labels on tobacco has reinforced the idea that tobacco is the leading cause of cancer and are useful to transform rural and urban opinions backed by tradition and culture.