

Current topics

Plan of action for tobacco control in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

The draft proposal of this plan of action was developed during the Inter-country Workshop on Formulation and Implementation of National Plans for Cardiovascular Diseases Control, held in Nicosia, Cyprus, from 5 to 8 December 1995.

The proposal was then discussed and the plan of action adopted during the Consultation on Tobacco Control held in the Regional Office, Alexandria, Egypt, from 26 to 28 December 1995.

Summary

The Thirty-ninth World Health Assembly, held in May 1986 issued a resolution on "Tobacco or Health", emphasizing that smoking causes great harm, whether the smoking is voluntary or passive. It called for the adoption of a global public health approach to address the problem, and condemned all tobacco promotion activities. The World Health Assembly also urged all Member States to implement tobacco control strategies and appealed to all organizations working under the umbrella of the United Nations to take effective action with a view to combating tobacco growing and use. It also called upon the WHO Director-General to intensify the part played by WHO in the field of health promotion and tobacco control.

In the light of the above, a plan of action proposal for tobacco control in the Eastern Mediterranean Region was developed and discussed by participants in the Inter-

country Workshop organized by the World Health Organization for the development and implementation of national plans for the prevention and control of cardiovascular diseases, held in Nicosia, Cyprus, from 5 to 8 December 1995. The plan was further discussed in detail and adopted during the Consultation on Tobacco Control, held in the Regional Office, Alexandria, Egypt, from 26 to 28 December 1995.

This plan of action, covering the years 1996–2000, calls upon all governments to enforce comprehensive tobacco-control measures. These include the establishment of an agency or commission for the central planning and coordination of activities relating to the national tobacco-control policy. Such measures also include health education, the issue of tobacco-control legislation and the use of pricing policies. The following are the main components of this plan of action:

- To make the Eastern Mediterranean Region an area completely free from tobacco advertising by the year 2000 within the framework of a comprehensive legislative plan for tobacco control;
- To increase the customs and taxes on tobacco progressively and to allocate a specific proportion of such taxes for funding health care services and other tobacco-control activities. For instance, such revenue would compensate for the funds paid by both the government and individuals for the treatment of tobacco-caused illness. It would enable the government to sponsor sports and art

activities in the place of tobacco companies, and it would lead to the substitution of healthy lifestyles advertising in place of tobacco advertising in the mass media;

- To incorporate information regarding the impact of tobacco on health in the medical and nursing curricula, in particular, and the curricula of all stages of education, in general;
- To abide by the resolution of the International Civil Aviation Organization and ban smoking from all air flights by the end of 1996¹;
- To involve religious leaders and other community leaders in tobacco control activities;
- To urge countries to commit themselves to implementing the activities indicated in the above plan and to seek to at least avoid the increase of smoking prevalence rate, particularly among women, children and adolescents.

1. Introduction

Tobacco consumption is on the increase in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which entails that, in the coming years, the number of people who will die or be disabled as a result of tobacco-related diseases will increase. It is currently estimated that, globally, approximately three million people die every year from tobacco consumption, and it is expected that this number will increase to ten million people every year by the year 2025. It is also estimated that seven million out of these ten million people would come from developing countries.

The increase of tobacco consumption in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is a result of several factors, including the increase of the population, the rise of the income and the purchasing power of individuals thus making cigarettes affordable, particularly to young people, the increase of interest in smoking on the part of girls and women, the lack of awareness of the dangers and hazards of smoking, the untiring attempts of international and local tobacco companies to promote their products, the insufficiency of funds allocated for tobacco-control activities and the inadequacy of the support provided in this respect.

Tobacco use is a preventable harm, which otherwise may cause illnesses such as lung cancer, chronic bronchitis and chronic lung obstruction, and may ultimately cause premature death. In addition, it may cause other cancers, such as mouth, tongue, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, bladder, pancreas, and kidney cancer, as well as cardiovascular diseases (particularly among the younger groups), peripheral vascular illnesses and apoplectic strokes. The nicotine content of tobacco causes addiction, and has been included in the *International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems* (10th revision) as an addiction-inducing substance. The symptoms that prove tobacco addiction are in every way similar to those that indicate addiction to other substances, including narcotics.

Tobacco use also affects the fetus during pregnancy, as the probability of miscarriage, stillbirth, early delivery and low birth weight increases with smoking. Moreover, infants whose mothers smoked during pregnancy have an increased risk of illness and of death at a very early stage of their lives. These effects are doubly felt in those

¹Note. The plan was formulated in 1995; implementation was initiated in 1996.

countries where nutrition and health care are inadequate.

Children are also strongly affected by tobacco smoke in their environment. Children of parents who smoke are at risk of repeated inflammation of the respiratory system, middle ear effusions, sudden-death syndrome, aggravated asthma and functional disorders of the respiratory system.

In addition to the health hazards that ensue from the use of tobacco, other economic effects accrue. Governments may realize some material gains, in the short term, through the imposition of taxes on tobacco. However, tobacco overburdens the economy of countries as a result of the increasing costs it entails, including the increase of medical and health care costs, the outlay of foreign currencies for the import of tobacco products and the poor use made of the agricultural land that is allocated to tobacco-growing rather than for the production of food crops.

While national consumption and production of tobacco remains a big problem in the Region, the progressive invasion of the countries of the Region by international tobacco companies constitutes a bigger problem, giving rise to much concern. These companies are constantly augmenting the scope and speed of their activities. They utilize local media and advertising agencies to transmit to the audience the sort of alluring publicity that has been prohibited in the source countries for years, and which portrays tobacco use in a fascinatingly dazzling light. The target groups are usually women, adolescents and children. In order to delude the audience, particularly the youth, into believing that smoking is not at variance with sports or art, these companies often sponsor sports and artistic events.

2. General objectives

- Formulation, promotion and implementation of national comprehensive policies and programmes for tobacco control
- Collection of information and data on tobacco use
- Creation of a public opinion that loathes smoking and considers non-smoking as the more normal behaviour
- Supporting the message of health and providing pertinent health education and information resources and means
- Promulgation and implementation of pertinent legislation
- Establishment of pricing policies in the Region that aim at minimizing tobacco consumption.

3. Periodic objectives

By the year 1997

- All states will have taken measures announcing hospitals and health-care centres as smoke-free places.

By the year 2000

- All Member States in the Region will have formulated national tobacco-control plans, with emphasis on minimizing female use of tobacco, preventing it among children and helping smokers to abstain.
- All Member States in the Region will have banned all forms of tobacco advertising.
- All countries will have banned smoking in closed public places, work places and means of transportation.

4. Strategies

The general and periodic objectives could be achieved through effective planning and well-coordinated procedures by the pertinent bodies working in varied fields. The following is an elaboration on each of the general objectives and some of the activities that could lead to their fulfilment.

General objective 1: Formulation, promotion and implementation of national comprehensive policies and programmes for tobacco control

Purpose

To ensure success, national governments should be committed to the plan, providing suitable leadership for its fulfilment. Indeed, national input is essential and involves coordinated cooperation among various bodies such as universities, non-governmental organizations and national agencies.

Proposed activities

A national coordinating tobacco-control organization or national committee should be established. If one already exists, it should be strengthened and its activities supported. Such a committee could be affiliated to a supreme council for the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Community organizations concerned with health, education and youth, as well as women's and religious organizations should support the activities of the national coordinating organization, if such an organization exists. If not, they should support the establishment of such a body.

General objective 2: Collection of information and data on tobacco use

Purpose

Data must be collected, at the national level, on tobacco use and all related issues, to establish a scientific foundation for effective action and for the formulation and evaluation of a relevant national programme. Studies should be carried out to investigate why young people smoke, in order to help protect them from starting the habit of smoking.

Proposed activities

Comprehensive surveys on tobacco availability and consumption should be conducted by all countries at least once every three years, using unified questionnaires. An estimation should be made of the effect of increasing taxes and tobacco prices on the consumption of tobacco during the duration of the workplan. Moreover, a study of public opinion and response regarding the proposed tobacco-control measures should be attempted. Data should also be collected on economic aspects affecting tobacco consumption, the volume of tobacco imports and exports, the tax levied on tobacco, compared with other taxes in general, the area of agricultural land used for planting tobacco in countries where such a crop is cultivated, and the best possible alternative crops that could yield competitive profit to the countries and farmers cultivating tobacco.

General objective 3: Creation of a public opinion that loathes smoking and considers non-smoking as the more normal behaviour

Purpose

All ways and means should be attempted to show that tobacco smoking is at variance with sound human behaviour, so as to establish a solid anti-tobacco social attitude. All factors instrumental in shaping human thought, such as religion, law, education and the media, should be utilized for the purpose.

Proposed activities

As religious opinions, both Islamic and Christian, have agreed on prohibiting smoking, these opinions should be propagated among religious leaders, who should be encouraged to convey them to the public on all occasions and make known the view of religion in this respect. These religious opinions should also be included in the curricula of religious faculties and institutes, and religious leaders should be alerted to the problems and hazards involved in smoking.

Teacher-training curricula should include a component concerned with "tobacco or health". This component should involve aspects such as: health information, effect of publicity on children, healthy lifestyles, and hazards of peer pressure. Information related to the slogan "tobacco or health" should also be included in school-health information curricula.

Moreover, all schools and educational institutions should be declared "non-smoking sites" and every possible action should be taken to ensure that teachers abstain from smoking in schools or in front of their students, so as not to provide a bad example.

Considering the essential role of the media in achieving these objectives, we must ensure that media materials should always emphasize the great hazards of smoking and convey the message that such suicidal behaviour is not worthy of normal human beings.

Celebrations of the World No-Tobacco Day and national non-smoking days could be utilized to demonstrate the positive aspects for abstention from smoking. Such celebrations can offer the right social environment that favours abstention and encourage tobacco-free lifestyles.

Human rights organizations should particularly emphasize the value of propagating awareness regarding health rights, such as the right to good health, the right to live in an environment free from pollution, and the right to life itself; considering smoking a slow killing of both smokers and their contacts. Activities to emphasize and propagate these rights should also be geared to issuing legislation for minimizing tobacco use, cultivation and manufacturing, and should encourage reorienting capital invested in tobacco industries towards useful, or at least not harmful, industries.

Human-rights concepts and the programmes sponsored by international organizations for teaching about human rights in schools and educational institutions should be utilized to alert students to the hazards of tobacco. The link between the right of individuals to life and health, and their refusal to subject themselves to harm through passive smoking, should be expanded.

Similarly, the rights of agricultural and industrial workers engaged in tobacco-growing and manufacture and thus subjected to tobacco hazards (even if they are non-smokers) should be pointed out.

General objective 4: Supporting the message of health and providing pertinent health-education and information resources and means

Purpose

The call for abstention from tobacco-smoking should be emphasized during the campaign for the adoption of healthy lifestyles and in programmes for the control of harmful substances.

Proposed activities

Adequate resources should be provided for the production of educational materials with comprehensible and accessible health-education components. Being capable of mobilizing the support of broad community sectors, nongovernmental organizations should adopt initiatives complementary to, and supportive of, government activities in this connection. Media programmes should also be utilized to support state efforts in transmitting the message of health preservation and promotion, and television, with its broad spectrum, can play a major role in this connection to offset tobacco publicity and media campaigns. In addition, information courses should be organized for media staff on the hazards of tobacco and to update their information on tobacco control.

For the media to play fully and properly its role in combating smoking, it has to have adequate pertinent information. National courses should be organized for media personnel and writers of different information materials in order to make them fully aware of the dangers of smoking and of the magnitude of ill health as a result of smoking, and to enable them to transmit the message of health directly and indirectly in their programmes. Media people should be continuously provided with up-to-date information on tobacco control.

General objective 5: Promulgation and implementation of pertinent legislation

Purpose

To issue a comprehensive, harmonious set of legislative and administrative procedures, since these form an integral part of any tobacco-control programme.

Proposed activities

Governments should issue and implement legislation and policies aiming at health promotion, and revise existing ones—particularly those issued more than ten years ago—to ensure their conformity with the latest knowledge about tobacco hazards. For example, smoking should be banned in all government offices and health institutions. Also, the resolution of the International Civil Aviation Organization banning smoking on international flights should be implemented and generalized to internal flights by the end of 1996.

As tobacco is cultivated in a number of Member States, legislation must be promulgated to prohibit expanding its area, and an effective policy should be adopted to plant these areas with other equally lucrative crops, in order to win the support of landowners.

Legislation should also be issued prohibiting the establishment of national tobacco industries. Already existing industry should be considered as hazardous to health and socioeconomic welfare. Heavy penalties should be applied to those violating tobacco-control rules.

Sports, artistic and cultural organizations, both national and international, should refuse any sponsorship for their activities from tobacco companies; and organizers of sports events should ban smoking and refuse the appearance of tobacco publicity during these events.

As tobacco companies depend greatly on publicity and advertising and other attractive marketing methods, existing legislation on restricting tobacco publicity and marketing should be put into force, until a full banning of tobacco advertising is issued. Meanwhile, each tobacco advertisement or product must carry a visible health warning occupying at least 20% of its area on tobacco hazards. Such warnings should be periodically updated and placed very visibly, particularly on tobacco packets.

General objective 6: Establishment of pricing policies in the Region which aim at minimizing tobacco consumption

Purpose

Increasing taxes on tobacco will lead to a reduction in its consumption, particularly among the youth and individuals with limited resources, while the revenues gained can boost health promotion resources. Hence, this policy should be applied in the service of public-health promotion.

Proposed activities

Governments should adopt policies whereby taxes on cigarettes should be periodically increased, and initial installation fees should be taken from national tobacco companies, as well as from foreign ones operating locally. Severe penalties on offenders should also be enforced. The revenues obtained could be utilized in health promotion activities (particularly those aiming at minimizing the use of tobacco) as well as in sponsoring the sports and artistic events formerly sponsored by tobacco companies, and in increasing public awareness regarding tobacco hazards.

5. Role of EMRO

The role of EMRO is to support, strengthen and coordinate the proposed activities, through the provision of technical information and resources.

Communication and coordination form an integral part of the support provided by EMRO, particularly communication with nongovernmental organizations such as the International Union against Cancer, the International Union against Tuberculosis and Lung-disease, and the International Organization for Consumers Unions. In addition, EMRO will establish evaluation mechanisms to monitor the progress achieved by national programmes, identify obstacles and problems, and provide technical support, as necessary. EMRO encourages cooperation with other health programmes, such as health promotion programmes, and communicable and noncommunicable disease control programmes. Furthermore, it organizes and supports meetings and research on tobacco control in the Region.

6. Time schedule for implementation of the tobacco-control plan during 1996–2000

Annually

- Member States provide EMRO with information on surveys conducted, the approved pricing policies or legislation on tobacco and any existing information on tobacco control.
- Member States celebrate the World No-Tobacco Day and national no-tobacco days and seize the opportunity to intensify publicity and activities for promotion of abstention. In addition, each

country introduces at least one additional principal health-education activity.

1996

- Each Member State receives the 1996–2000 plan of action for broad distribution to principal target groups.
- Member States are informed of the principal priority recommendation of this year: “Freeing the Eastern Mediterranean Region from tobacco advertising”.
- Member States that do not, so far, have national comprehensive tobacco control policies should develop and implement relevant policies.
- Medical societies issue statements declaring clearly that tobacco smoking is harmful and addictive.
- Member States adopt and implement the resolution of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) banning smoking in all local and international flights, by the end of 1996.

1997

- Member States issue relevant non-smoking legislation.
- Member States, whether or not ICAO members, which have national aviation companies ban smoking on all flights.
- Smoking is banned on the premises of all health and educational institutions.

1998

- Member States inform EMRO of the progress achieved in issuing smoking

control legislation, particularly in connection with banning publicity and creation of broad non-smoking areas.

- EMRO organizes an intercountry meeting to evaluate tobacco-control activities in the Region and to revise the regional plan.
- Legislation governing industrial and other worksites includes policies on making workplaces non-smoking.
- Member States conduct studies to investigate the degree of tobacco use among the population following the implementation of tobacco-control measures.

1999

- Endorsement of comprehensive legislation banning or restricting tobacco use.
- Follow-up of the collection of data on cases of tobacco-related morbidity and mortality, to utilize them in anti-smoking campaigns.
- Replacement of tobacco plantations with alternative crops in countries cultivating tobacco.
- Continuation of conducting economic analyses of tobacco use costs.

2000

- Implementation of comprehensive national tobacco-control policies in all states which did not formerly have such policies.