

The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is hosting Ambassador Nancy Brinker, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control at the Regional Office premises on Sunday, 25 October 2009. This visit is as an extension to the global breast cancer awareness month and aims to focus on the link between tobacco use and cancer.

Ambassador Brinker is an American activist who has been fighting for a cure against breast cancer for almost 30 years. She was chosen to occupy the global position of WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control based on her tireless efforts to find a cure for breast cancer, which, in addition to other cancers, is largely attributed to tobacco use.

Ambassador Brinker's visit is an endorsement of our continuous efforts to fight, prevent and control cancer and tobacco use for research has shown that tobacco use is capable of damaging nearly every organ of the human body, causes at least 15 different cancers and is solely responsible for 30% of all cancer-related deaths. Statistically speaking, out of the 5 million 'preventable' deaths caused by tobacco use every year, 1.8 million of these deaths are cancer-related.

Cancer prevention and control begins with tobacco control, in addition to reducing the prevalence of its use. This however is not such a straightforward endeavour as many challenges and obstacles face tobacco control advocates in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including: tobacco industry activities; social acceptance of tobacco use; high prevalence figures; new trends in tobacco use; and lack of sustainability of tobacco control activities.

In spite of all these challenges, we have still managed to attain a number of core successes, namely: the global adoption of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control; the declaration of Mecca and Medina smoke-free, and the prohibition of the sale and use of tobacco products in those two Holy cities; the implementation of pictorial health warnings in four Member States; the enforcement of tobacco-free policies in public places with no designated areas for smokers, in seven Member States; the banning of all forms of advertising and sponsorship of tobacco products in seven Member States; and the ratification of the Convention by 17 Member States.

There are also many achievements and success stories for cancer control in the Region, most important of which was the endorsement of the 5-year Regional Strategy for Cancer Prevention and Control (2009–2013) by all Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

In fact, the positive developments highlighted above and more have prompted the Regional Director to confirm that change is inevitably coming and that the Eastern Mediterranean Region can indeed lead the tobacco and cancer control movements, and make a real difference. However, this will never happen unless each and every single one of us here today, and in the society at large work together.

Finally, and as an integral part of Ambassador Brinker's visit to the Regional Office, we will celebrate the signing of an appeal by both herself and Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, Regional Director, which calls upon all Member States to implement the measures and Articles stipulated by the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to put an end to the 'preventable' disease and death tolls caused by tobacco use, in particular, cancer.

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