

Politics on tobacco is injurious to the nation's health

During the 2010s there will be about 1 million tobacco deaths a year in India and about 70% of these deaths will be before old age. Currently, tobacco is responsible for 1 in 5 of all male deaths in middle age. Men who are cigarette smokers lose ten years of their lives, mainly as a result of tuberculosis, respiratory and heart diseases, and cancer. Unlike alcohol, there is no safe level of smoking, and consumption of a few cigarettes / bidis per day increases the risks of dying prematurely by up to 50%. This menace is not even sparing our children and youth, with nearly 50% of school children using tobacco products in northeast India. Another study reported that every day 5,500 new children take up tobacco habits in India, whereas a mere 2% of Indian adults quit the habit-often only after falling ill. There is a plethora of evidence-based information on the hazards of tobacco. If you type in the keywords 'smoking' and 'cancer' on Google, you get whopping 5,120,000 search results in 0.3 seconds. If you type smoking, cancer, research on Google, you get 5,68,000 results in 0.36 seconds. The International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization has categorized tobacco as a category I carcinogen (confirmed human carcinogen). Tobacco smoke has 10 additional category I carcinogens (4-aminobehenyl, benzene, chromium, nickel, cadmium, etc.) and several dozen category II and III carcinogens. Is that not sufficient to ban tobacco?

India has reasonably strong laws but the implementation and monitoring remain half-hearted. The Government of India passed the Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply, and Distribution Bill in 2003. However, advertisement of other consumer products with the same name as the tobacco product (surrogate advertisement) is rampant, smoking in public places remains unabated, and sale of tobacco to minors continues. Unfortunately, violators are rarely penalized. Our society appears to be very tolerant of such violations and do not seem to consider it as an important public health issue. Gutka and pan masala (with or without tobacco) pose a bigger challenge in the current society than smoking. Their non-tobacco counterparts, with similar names, are being constantly advertised. Several states have tried to ban these products but the ban has been reversed by the courts on legal technicalities.

Tobacco use is not just a habit disorder: the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) has now notified 'tobacco dependence' as a disease. Tobacco is the only legally available consumer product in the world that kills even when used as per the manufacturer's specifications. The Indian tobacco industry, for the last 15 years, has consistently highlighted the same ridiculous facts: India is the world's second largest producer of tobacco, tobacco cultivation provides livelihoods to over 6 million farmers, and the industry employs 20 million workers and contributes over 70 billion rupees to government's earnings. Does any one care about 250 million tobacco users that are victims of the industry? If we had embarked on tobacco systematic de-growth strategies, by now the tobacco industry would have happily diversified into other areas.

Tobacco industry has almost half a century old tradition of wishfully ignoring their obligations to their consumers. The first health warning on cigarette packets appeared in 1971 and stated: "Warning by H.M. Government. Smoking can damage your health." They have consciously downplayed the health sequels of tobacco usage and spend several billion dollars in advertising to portray smoking as a "cool" product with slim chance of injury. So glamorous and powerful are their advertisements that the attempts to educate the society gets lost in the din. This industry, riddled with hundreds of billion dollar lawsuits and stringent laws in developed countries is targeting east Europe, Asia and Africa. India has 300 million tobacco users!

Health professionals in India can play a pivotal role in the fight against this epidemic. By making use of every opportunity to discourage the tobacco habit they can make significant contributions to tobacco control. All health professionals in India should possess the skill to help people quit tobacco and they need to lead by example and quit the habit themselves.

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