

Cigarettes and sports

TOBACCO and healthy activities like sports don't go together. Perhaps realising this, the federal sports minister clarified the remarks he had earlier made linking the two. At a meeting of the prime minister's task force on sports Aijaz Hussain Jakhrani, who has also served as health minister, had proposed that the government levy an additional two per cent tax on every pack of cigarettes and channel the funds towards the promotion of sports. Clarifying the matter later on, he said that taxing tobacco can reduce the health bill. However, the ethics of generating funds for sports through tobacco sales is questionable. The minister's suggestion also runs contrary to the guidelines laid down by the World Health Organisation, specifically the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control of 2005. Advertising and publicity by tobacco companies has also fallen out of favour with global sporting bodies such as the International Olympic Committee.

Tobacco is a major killer in Pakistan. Health experts have described the situation in the country as a 'tobacco epidemic' while figures say 100,000 people die from tobacco use annually here. Lung cancer is also the number one cause of deaths from cancer in Pakistan. When all these factors are considered, using tobacco sales to fund sports does not seem right. What the minister proposed sends out the wrong message. People in this country are in dire need of healthy activities and recreation and the government's neglect of sports is quite obvious. But the situation cannot be remedied by funding sports through cigarette sales. One activity promotes a healthy lifestyle while the other destroys it. If anything, strong efforts are required to counter the macho image that smoking enjoys in society. The youth especially must be weaned away from this deadly habit while sports should be funded through other, healthier means.