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World No Tobacco Day

In Pakistan, the cancer continues to spread

Smoking in public places is polluting the air four times WHO standards

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 ISLAMABAD

Farhan, 32, has lost his father and his grandfather to cancer. Both died in their early 50s. Despite this, Farhan smokes nearly two packets a day. "I started when I was barely 13. It was just about being accepted into the group," he recalls. "From a cigarette or two I didn't even realise when I hit the two-packs-a-day mark."

The National Health Survey of Pakistan says there are 30 million smokers in the country, nearly half of who are 25 to 44 years old. In Pakistan, smoking mostly leads to cancers of the oral cavity, voice box, lungs and upper digestive tract. "You do not see many oral cancer cases in developed countries anymore

EQUIVALENCE

200

cigarettes do the same damage as one hour of pipe smoking according to the WHO

but it creates havoc in the sub-continent," says Dr Sameer Qureshi, who is an associate professor for ear, nose and throat and head and neck surgery at Jinnah hospital in Karachi.

Smoking in public eating places is partly to blame. Professor Javaid Khan at the Aga Khan University Hospital (AKU), studied this. According to his findings, tobacco smoke pollution in cafes, restaurants and food courts in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Karachi are extremely high.

Tobacco smoke pollution

levels are assessed by measuring pollutants in the air, particularly fine particles called PM_{2.5}. In non-smoking venues, the average PM_{2.5} value was 101 micrograms per square metre (g/m³), in hotels and restaurants it was six times higher and in sheesha-smoking places it was 1,745 g/m³. Under WHO guidelines, they can't be over 250 g/m³.

First, we need an immediate ban on these imports. Second, we need a pictorial awareness and education campaign that doesn't just target doctors.

Qureshi advises people who smoke, chew tobacco or eat chhalia and gutka to seek help when they notice any small ulcer, feel the slightest irritation or see a discolouration. Qureshi has encountered people who have been told by hakeems that if they let any metal touch their ulcers it will result in cancer. Thus, many of them avoid biopsies which is essential to deter-

mine cancer.

Raising taxes will raise tobacco prices 10 per cent and would hopefully lower buying by eight per cent in low- and middle-income countries, says Ziauddin University's Dr Abbas Zafar.

The Sindh Assembly recently banned sheesha smoking. As a result, shops at Empress Market in Karachi have been opening early and selling hookahs at double the price. "Since the ban was passed on sheesha use in public places people have started buying them for their homes," said a shopkeeper. The small hookahs used to cost Rs500 but are going for Rs1,500 and people are willing to pay.

Professor Rehana Anees Yakoob, a psychologist at the Karwan-e Hayat psychiatric facility under the management of the Karachi Port Trust, said every single drug user interviewed said that they began with cigarettes.

UNCERTAINTY

Devolution of health ministry raises questions

SEHRISH WASIF

ISLAMABAD. One wonders what message No Tobacco Day has to offer to the people of Pakistan with the imminent devolution of the Ministry of Health, under 18th amendment. This puts the future of Tobacco Control Cell (TCC) at stake. Talking to *The Express Tribune*, sources were of the view that in order to effectively battle the issue, it is important to have one vision on its control. "However, this can only be done at the federal level as the cells being operated in the provinces simultaneously will only foster confusion and mixed regulatory strategy." The provincial bodies will not have the capacity, institutional setups, requisite training

knowledge or experience to tackle the problem on their own. While the cost will go up due to parallel setups and duplication of activities, the effectiveness will go down, they added. On the federal level, the cell has been the instrumental in taking initiatives such as imposition of graphic health warnings, advertising campaigns and bans on smoking in public places. "There was a new drive towards stopping access of cigarettes to the youth but the devolution process might be a serious hurdle to this, eventually," added sources. The lack of ability to introduce new effective regulations and means to enforce current laws will result in the tobacco industry reaping the benefits.