

WORLD NO-TOBACCO DAY

Sale of 10-stick cigarette packs to be banned from Oct

Mahina Maqbool
Islamabad

Better sense has finally prevailed within the rank and file of the Ministry of Health, which restored its credibility here on Wednesday by announcing discontinuation of the sale of 10-stick cigarette packs throughout Pakistan with effect from October 1, 2011, rather than two years later.

Minister for Health Riaz Hussain Pirzada made an announcement to this effect while addressing a seminar arranged in connection with World No-Tobacco Day. Organised by the Tobacco Control Cell, the seminar was attended by Additional Secretary Health Khalid Hanif, Additional Director General of the Tobacco Control Cell Dr. Minhaj-us-Siraj, Dr. Sumaia from the World Health Organization, and DIG National Highways and Motorway Police Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, and Abdul Sattar Chaudhry, who was introduced as the father of tobacco control in Pakistan in view of his pioneering role in establishing a programme for tobacco control in the country.

Bowing to the tactics of the tobacco industry, the Ministry of Health had moved a summary to the Ministry of Law, seeking an extension of two years (from October 2011 to October 2013) for implementation of the Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO) seeking discontinuation of the sale of 10-stick cigarette packs. Strong resistance from the media, followed by reaction from anti-tobacco campaigners, compelled the Ministry of Health to stop short of bestowing a huge favour upon the ever-expanding tobacco industry.

One of the funnier aspects of the summary moved by the Ministry of Health was that it had proposed that the two-year 'extension' be announced as a new tobacco control measure on the occasion of World No-Tobacco Day, little realizing that this annual observation is about stricter enforcement of laws discouraging tobacco use, and not ones that offer relief to the tobacco industry!

"The sale of cigarette packs of less than 20 sticks will not be allowed anywhere in Pakistan after October 1, 2011," Pirzada

stated, hoping that the measure will prove to be a deterrent for old and new smokers alike. He articulated the intention to showcase Islamabad as a model tobacco-free city through stricter enforcement of the 2002 anti-smoking ordinance. The minister also announced that the pictorial health warning on cigarette packs will also be rotated later this year.

Taking to the media on the sidelines of the seminar, Pirzada confirmed that all national health programmes will be retained at the federal level in the post-devolution scenario. "However, the services sector has got to be devolved to the provinces," he added. The minister clarified that devolution will be a slow and gradual process dominated by stricter monitoring at the provincial level to ensure that the country's international commitments continue to be fulfilled. With respect to hospitals, he regretted that health facilities at the tehsil headquarter level leave a lot to be desired in terms of availability of trained human resource in particular.

Khalid Hanif flagged the

chronic issue of poor implementation of policies on account of absence of a robust monitoring and implementation mechanism.

Earlier, Dr. Minhaj shared data on morbidity and mortality resulting from tobacco use at the national and global levels. He shared that the Cell has obtained approval for the establishment of smoking cessation clinics across all federal government hospitals, and hoped that at least one clinic would be up and running in the near future.

Dr. Minhaj also shared recent achievements of the Cell, which included the introduction of tobacco control measures in the curriculum of secondary schools. Punjab, he informed, has taken the lead in this respect, with other provinces expected to follow suit. Future plans of the Cell include the development of a National Policy for Tobacco Control, amendments in current legislation in line with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), complete ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorships, as well as active lobbying with the Revenue

Department for enhancement taxes on tobacco.

Dr. Sumaia read out the message of the Regional Director of WHO Dr. Hussein Gezairy, who has underscored the significance of FCTC in response to globalisation of the tobacco epidemic. He urged countries 'to do more' actively taking the steps needed to pass and enforce necessary legislation. He has called upon non-parties to the FCTC to get on board, the civil society and NGOs to advocate, and the public to demand compliance from the government for effective implementation of the landmark treaty that came into force five years ago.

The ceremony concluded with an award ceremony acknowledging the contribution of different stakeholders in the anti-tobacco drive. Prominent among the winners were top position-holders of an essay contest organized by the Cell on the hazards of tobacco use. Ayesha Hasan, Mishal Dildar and Shiraz Hussain — all them students of Bahria College — clinched the top-three positions, respectively.