

PICTURES ON CIGARETTE PACKS

# Warnings to cover no less than 50% of display area

TAG meeting brainstorms the way forward

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Islamabad

Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on Tobacco Control Thursday developed consensus over the need to have at least two concurrent sets of picture-based warnings that cover no less than 50% of the principal display area on the front and back of the cigarette packs.

The TAG strongly endorsed the government's decision to incorporate pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and others with effect from January 1, 2010.

The high-powered meeting, which was chaired by additional secretary Siddique Akbar and co-chaired by representative of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Dr. Khalif Bile Mohamud, reviewed and short-listed several photographs contributed by leading health specialists, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean Office of the WHO, and formulated a set of recommendations that will govern the eventual choice.

The participants recommended that the photographs should be indigenous; should be shocking and fear arousing; should be strategically placed on the top front and back bottom of the cigarette pack; and should be accompanied with textual warnings in both Urdu and English. They proposed that same rules should also apply to smokeless tobacco products such as 'naswar' and 'gutka.' The meeting agreed that the selected photographs should target current smokers in order to encourage cessation; young people in order to save them from being inducted into the trap of smoking, as new recruits; and non-smokers in order to adequately educate them of the ill-effects of tobacco use. Photographs depicting patients with head and neck tumours; gangrene and cardiovascular diseases were short-listed, alongside others showing the harmful effects of tobacco on unborn babies; and of second-hand smoke on children.

The meeting was attended by senior officials from the ministries of education, tourism and interior,



leading cardiologists, oncologists, and chest specialists from Shaauk Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, Aga Khan University Hospital, and Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, and representatives of the Federal Bureau of Revenue, Journalists Health Forum, National Alliance for Tobacco Control, TheNetwork for Consumer Protection, and Coalition for Tobacco Control.

Addressing the meeting, Dr. Bile saluted the government for withdrawing the SRO on designated smoking areas. "This has addressed one of the black spots of public health in Pakistan," he stated. He said, since a large proportion of Pakistan's population cannot read text messages, this creates an obvious inequity, enabling the tobacco industry to promote their product. Even countries with 100 per cent literacy rate have converted from text-based to pictorial warnings simply because picture-based messages communicate a thousand words, Dr. Bile said. The WHO chief warned the TAG members, "The tobacco industry will go to every level of the government; they will use lawyers, former secretaries, and top-notch officials to defeat the picture-based messages. This is why this forum is so important."

Dr. Bile said that the tobacco industry will come up with all kinds of excuses to buy time and

to obtain an extension in the January 2010 deadline. He said, the tobacco industry and the baby milk formula industry are two of the strongest opponents of health

Dr. Bile further recommended that the milestones achieved in the domain of tobacco control in Pakistan need to be strengthened through prohibition of second-hand smoking. He said, the number of second-hand smokers is always more; second-hand smokers are condemned to morbidity and mortality without being the main culprit. Dr. Bile pointed out that the doors of second-hand smoking have been closed in the west. "Some of the only countries open to them are populous countries like Pakistan, India etc., where the tobacco industry can get a large number of new recruits, who do not have the mental choice to think reasonably," he warned.

Implementation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control Director General Shaheen Masud requested the WHO to assist the Tobacco Control Cell in hiring the services of a professional photographer, a graphic designer, an advertiser, and a legal consultant to gather high-resolution photographs and graphic images, as well as to finalise the Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO) on pictorial health warnings. She also presented a synopsis of recent events leading to the withdrawal of the SRO on Designated Smoking Areas, and the decision to introduce picture-based warnings.

Other participants recommended the need to follow-up measures with awareness-raising campaigns and an increase in prices of tobacco so that it is rendered beyond the purchasing power of a majority. The TAG expressed displeasure over the fact that the FBR did not heed to the recommendations for price increase last year. Shaheen Masud informed that this year too, the Ministry of Health has already sent a recommendation for price increase in taxes on tobacco in the forthcoming budget.