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Sheesha as injurious as any other tobacco product

50% hotels, restaurants in twin cities promoting Sheesha among youth, survey reveals

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ISLAMABAD: Fifty per cent of the big hotels and restaurants located in Pakistan's metropolitan cities are maximizing their profits by luring young people into smoking 'Sheesha,' - a relatively new tobacco product, the smoke of which contains tobacco and molasses, along with some fruit flavours. This new form of addiction is being promoted in a dreamy environment created in dimly-lit rooms with light music and videos of Arabic dance.

According to a consumer survey carried out by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection, thousands of youngsters are getting addicted to Sheesha, which is freely available in hotels, restaurants, and Sheesha bars in the commercial and residential areas of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The promotion of this tobacco product, which has turned into a snobbish value and status symbol, is a clear defiance of the Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance 2002.

The Sheesha industry propagates that Sheesha is not a tobacco product. In reality, it is just as injurious as any other tobacco product. Sheesha inhaling is excessive and is a relatively longer 'fun' activity in which a lot of nicotine and tar is inhaled. In a smoking session which normally culminates in an hour, an individual takes 200 puffs of Sheesha, which is equal to inhaling eight cigarettes.

In almost all hotels offering Sheesha, young people - some of them less than 18 years of age - had unhindered access to smoking. Some hotels have bothered to display the warning, 'Underage sale is prohibited,' but such warnings serve no practical purpose as the management is neither willing to concede a loss in income nor dis-



STARRING SHEESHA: stallholder arranges crystalline jars of Sheesha (hookah) at Melody Food Street in Islamabad Wednesday. — Online

please the elite generation.

Youngsters start thronging the Sheesha bars in markets and residential areas in the evenings and the smoky hullabaloo continues till late night. The attractive design of the hookah, the menu and paste packet offering a variety of flavours has turned this form of addiction into a group recreational activity. Unchecked outdoor advertisements of Sheesha bars and restaurants are also playing a role in trapping more and more people.

According to the Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance 2002, smoking is not allowed in enclosed public places in-

cluding hotels and restaurants; however, the implementation of the law in the context of Sheesha smoking, is invisible. Sheesha is available even at food streets.

The only concern of the promoters of Sheesha is maximization of their profits. A pharmacy chain in Rawalpindi and Islamabad has established a separate corner for the sale of Sheesha, imported brands of cigarettes and other tobacco products. What a link between life-saving drugs and the business of selling death!

Sheesha is the modern form of the Arabian hookah, which was discovered in Indo-Pak subcontinent and approached other nations and civilizations via Iran. It is

comparatively new in Pakistan. Its basic structure is built of glass whose upper-most part is known as a tobacco bowl where Sheesha mixture is placed over a charcoal tray.

Sheesha is an expensive hookah which costs between Rs6000 to 12000. The mixture used in the tobacco bowl costs between Rs260 to 800, depending on the quality and quantity of the ingredients. The tobacco bowl can be filled 12 times by using the smallest packet of the mixture, which is imported or smuggled from UAE, Syria and Egypt. One-time usage of the Sheesha apparatus costs between Rs100 to 300 or even more.

However, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recently released a report on the health consequences of Sheesha use. Sheesha smoking sessions last for 20 to 80 minutes, during which the smoker may take anywhere between 50 and 200 puffs. The Sheesha smoker may, therefore, inhale as much smoke during one session as a cigarette smoker would inhale consuming 100 or more cigarettes. Even after it has passed through water, the smoke produced by a Sheesha contains high level of toxins, including carbon monoxide, heavy metals and other carcinogens.

A survey done on youngsters of school-going age in Karachi recently showed that almost 70 per cent had tried Sheesha in the past six months, and this included children as young as seven. Many of the commercially available packets used for Sheesha smoking have misleading labels such as 0.5 per cent nicotine and zero tar. Moreover, the sharing of Sheesha poses an additional risk of TB and hepatitis transmission. It is indeed sad that in spite of an ordinance in place which bans smoking in public places, many restaurants, hotels and bars are fearlessly flouting the law by offering Sheesha to their customers.