

Towards smoke-free eating places

Level of tobacco smoke pollution higher at venues serving 'sheesha', says NATC study

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As a prelude to effective enforcement of the anti-tobacco law, the Tobacco Control Cell of the Ministry of Health has posted letters to 55 hotels, restaurants, cafeterias and leading fast food outlets in Islamabad, apprising them of the responsibilities and powers that rest with them in connection with implementation of the law.

According to the director general (implementation) of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Yusuf Khan, the objective is to first create awareness about the Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance by sharing its relevant sections with the managements of hotels, restaurants and cafeterias and then to follow it up with enforcement, which has thus far remained on the back-burner.

Apart from government employees like police officers of the rank of sub-inspector and above, members of the public like MNAs, MPAs, senators, government officers of BPS-

20, principals of public and private schools, managers of restaurants, bus drivers and conductors, railway guards, have been authorised to act under the law. The two acts that they can perform are (i) eject a smoker; and (ii) file a written complaint before a magistrate of the first class.

"Authorised persons are authorised officers," says the law. Therefore, for the purposes of an ordinary citizen, in case they find that a fellow customer is smoking in a restaurant or cafeteria, they should not confront the smoker himself, but complain to the authorised person, i.e., the restaurant manager, to stop the smoker and remind him of his legal responsibility. The manager is authorised to either eject the violator or file a written complaint before a first class magistrate.

Talking to 'The News' here on Thursday, Yusuf Khan said, "We will be creating awareness about the law among those categories of persons who have been authorised by the law to take action either by ejecting the violators or by submitting a written complaint before

magistrates of the first class against those who smoke in public places."

Yusuf Khan shared that the Tobacco Control Cell has also created advocacy material to raise awareness about the law, and about the hazards of smoking and second-hand smoke. "We must realise that secondhand smoke is just as harmful as smoking itself," he said.

According to Dr. Javaid A. Khan, chair of the National Alliance for Tobacco Control, which has recently concluded a study to monitor the quality of air at various hotels and restaurants in Pakistan, "Tobacco smoke pollution (TSP) level is up to 10 times higher in Pakistani hotels and restaurants than the safe permissible limits of World Health Organisation (WHO)." In this research, which has been conducted in collaboration with the Aga Khan University and Roswell Park Hospital, USA, the level of TSP was measured at 40 restaurants and hotels situated in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad.

According to the study, the overall tobacco smoke pollution level PM 2.5 "was as high as 1800 mi-

crogram per square meter compared to ideal recommended limit of less than 15 microgram per square meter set by the WHO." Warning the public on the dangers of TSP, Dr. Javaid Khan said that level of air pollution emitted from cigarette is 10 times greater than diesel car exhaust. According to the study, most hotels and restaurants in Pakistan have toxin levels of up to 6 times higher than the air pollution usually prevailing on busy city roads. The level of TSP is higher at venues serving 'sheesha' to their customers.

The use of tobacco causes 18 types of cancers, in addition to heart disease and strokes. Globally, tobacco kills 5,000,000 people every year. It is the largest preventable cause of death in the world. In Pakistan, tobacco kills 100,000 persons every year, which comes to 274 deaths per day! In addition to this, 1,200 boys and girls of ages below 18 years take up smoking every day.

In his letter sent out to various eateries and hotels, Yusuf Khan has referred to relevant sections of the

law that empower owners and managers of eating places to take action against violators of the smoking ban. While Section 4 declares the managers of hotels, restaurants and cafeterias as authorised persons to launch a complaint in writing against the smoker, Section 10 makes it mandatory for them to display a signboard at a conspicuous place, in and outside the premises, stating that the place is a 'No Smoking Zone' and that 'Smoking is an Offence.' Furthermore, the owner will be responsible if the manager of his establishment is negligent and permits smoking of tobacco products in any form (cigarette, pipes, cigars and 'sheesha') within premises of which he is in-charge.

The law also calls for discontinuation of existing Designated Smoking Areas (DSAs) in premises of hotels and restaurants. Yusuf Khan has requested owners of hotels, restaurants and cafeterias to show compliance of the ordinance and to remove all DSAs within their respective premises. "Cigarette dispensaries, ashtrays and names of

tobacco products from menus may also be removed," the letter states. Sheraton Pakistan is one of the first hotels to have become smoke-free.

Coming to the question of what more needs to be done, the Tobacco Control Cell needs to solicit the support of the Ministry of Tourism, which should take action against all hotels and restaurants in the country that violate the smoking ban. Secondly, the provincial governments need to get into a proactive mode to enforce the law in the districts, now that more of the health sector funding will go to the provinces. Thirdly, it is the responsibility of the public to protest to the management of a hotel, restaurant or cafeteria when they go out for eating and notice someone violating the ban on smoking. Finally, it is perhaps for the multinational fast food chains, which offer completely smoke-free environments all over the world, to set an example in Pakistan as well by respecting the smoking ban and prohibiting their clients from endangering public health by smoking within their premises.