

■ ANTI-TOBACCO MESSAGES

Public transport vehicles set for launch

Shahina Maqbool
Islamabad

In order to raise public awareness about the health hazards of tobacco use, the Tobacco Control Cell will shortly be launching four public transport buses and coasters carrying anti-tobacco messages and pictorial warnings for a year, 'The News' learnt here on Thursday.

These public transport vehicles will ply on routes between Islamabad and Rawalpindi and will have messages in Urdu with regard to tobacco causing cancer in not just smokers but also fellow passengers, who are forced to breathe in secondhand tobacco smoke. The message is based on the advice that secondhand tobacco smoke is as harmful as smoking itself: it is murder in addition to suicide!

The initiative is just one of the many steps being taken by the Tobacco Control Cell to create public

awareness about the health hazards of smoking and secondhand tobacco smoke. These awareness and education activities will begin by informing the public about the health hazards of tobacco use, followed by creating public awareness about the tobacco control laws. This will be followed by enforcement of the laws through the Federal Enforcement Committee in partnership with Islamabad District Administration in ICT.

For creating awareness about the dangers of secondhand tobacco smoke, the Cell has developed 'fact-sheets' in Urdu and English which will not only appear in the newspapers but will also be distributed among the general public at traffic signals, restaurants and other public places.

The Director General of the Tobacco Control Cell, Yusuf Khan says, "The government or its law enforcement agencies are not the only means for effective enforcement of

tobacco control laws. Enforcement becomes more effective if there is understanding and support for the cause among the general public. With this logic in mind, we are first creating awareness about the health hazards of tobacco use, followed by awareness about tobacco control laws and then enforcement on-ground."

The public needs to be aware that it is not just the smoker who suffers from the negative health impacts of tobacco use. On the contrary, those who are inhaling secondhand tobacco smoke are just as much affected. Studies show that when a person smokes a cigarette, he/she inhales only 15% of the smoke while the rest of the 85% of smoke or 'sidestream smoke' goes out into the surrounding space. It is this 85% that non-smokers are subjected to inhale. Those who inhale this 'sidestream smoke' are usually non-smoking colleagues in working

places, children at home or in family cars, fellow passengers in public transport vehicles, etc. The need is to create awareness among these 'passive smokers' that they should object to being subjected to tobacco smoke.

Another aspect of the law that needs effective enforcement is the sale of tobacco products to minors or children under 18 years of age. It is common for parents who smoke, to give money to a child and send him or her to the neighborhood shop to buy cigarettes. But who can tell who the cigarettes are meant for? Therefore, there is need to create awareness about the fact that it is illegal to sell cigarettes to those who are under 18 years of age and shopkeepers and bazaar associations need to be sensitized about this aspect of the law. If appreciation, understanding and agreement is created among shopkeepers about the prohibition of sale of tobacco prod-

ucts to minors, then enforcing this important section of the law will be much easy and effective.

To this effect, the Tobacco Control Cell has planned meetings and presentations with various bazaar associations of Islamabad to take up the issue of prohibition of sales to minors, not just at shops and 'khokas' but also with restaurants that offer 'sheesha' to boys and girls under 18 years. Various Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials are being developed to spread awareness about the various aspects of the law among relevant stakeholders and citizens in general.

The efforts of the Tobacco Control Cell appear to be focused on and limited to the Islamabad Capital Territory even though the rest of the country requires similar activities just as much. Responding to this concern, Yusuf Khan said that this aspect is also being addressed. "The recently approved National Tobacco

Control Programme will be working in partnership with provincial governments and will be carrying out activities in the districts that fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces. This programme will commence in July 2010 and address this concern," he assured.

In addition, through this programme, the Ministry of Health will assist and encourage the provincial governments to implement their own provincial tobacco control programmes. This would also include effective enforcement of tobacco control laws right at the district level. It would also ensure that advertisement and promotional activities carried out by the tobacco companies are also regulated more closely. Secretary Health Khushnood Lashari has already written letters to all provincial chief secretaries to emphasize the role of the provincial governments in the fight against tobacco.