

World No Tobacco Day

Warning signs

The government is finally taking tobacco control steps with pictorial warning on cigarette packs

By Dr Arif Azad

World No Tobacco Day falls tomorrow. On the day, a flurry of events are organised all over the world to highlight the deadly effects of tobacco on human health.

Tobacco has been in use for centuries, with no countervailing public health campaign to raise public awareness about its harmful effects. This is, however, changing with tobacco control advocates making highly visible interventions. To say that tobacco kills 5.4 million people every year worldwide no longer produces howls of protests. This is largely due to growing anti-tobacco movement which is underway since the introduction of Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).

This treaty, drafted under the aegis of World Health Organisation (WHO), was adopted by world health assembly in 2003. So far 168 countries have signed up to this landmark treaty which places mandatory obligations upon all the parties to incorporate the FCTC into domestic legislation on tobacco control. Like other countries, Pakistan ratified the FCTC on November 3, 2004 binding herself into legal obligations enshrined in the convention.

FCTC is a comprehensive convention which embraces full panoply of tobacco control measures which, if fully adhered to, can dent tobacco consumption worldwide.

This has proved to be the single most important document for governments and public health activists to boost tobacco control efforts. With tobacco regulation regimes becoming more stringent in the West, tobacco industry has targeted developing countries for business expansion.

In a year-end review, the *Guardian weekly*, surveying the state of tobacco industry's profitability, revealed that while profits of big tobacco giants have fallen in Europe and elsewhere where tobacco control laws are strict, the tobacco industry has made up for these losses by making record profits from countries like Pakistan and Nigeria. In Pakistan, 274 people die every day on account of tobacco-related diseases. Yet tobacco control efforts in Pakistan have been sluggish despite health officials and tobacco control advocates' knowing well that cigarette smoking has been on the rise.

Again, like global tobacco control movement, this may be about to change in Pakistan as well, thanks to one provision of FCTC which the government of Pakistan has pledged to

honour. The provision relates to article 11 of FCTC which requires all member countries to introduce picture-based health warnings to stem the rising tide of smoking epidemic.

Pictorial health warnings have been demonstrated to be effective in making smokers aware of ill effects of smoking on health — embracing the intention of either quitting or indeed quitting smoking. Since these interrelated actions add to reduction in smoking, the industry has resolutely, and with some success, resisted the introduction of pictorial health warnings. One simple reason for resistance, apart from falling revenues from reduced sales, is the fear of losing out industry's carefully cultivated area of cigarette pack to public health campaigners.

Australia heading into the direction of plain packing and Paraguay introducing pictorial warning on 90 percent of the cigarette pack.

Despite this massive financial and political pressure being applied on governments by the tobacco industry, a growing number of governments are introducing pictorial health warnings. This is a happy augury for public health advocates and governments concerned with protection of health of their citizens. This year World No Tobacco Day brings glad tidings from Pakistan where the government is finally heading in the direction of implementing Article 11 of FCTC.

Pakistan made a significant leap forward on pictorial warning legislation when on May 31, 2009, the then federal minister for health, Mir Ijaz

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It is important to keep in mind that ever since the introduction of restrictions on tobacco advertising, cigarette pack has become the vehicle for subtle advertising by tobacco industry. This has taken various forms from making cigarette pack attractive by sophisticated design, using different colours to convey different messages about smoking being cool or using terms like 'mild' or 'tar-free' to make smoking look less hazardous than it actually is. That is why everything from previously textual health warnings to recently pictorial health warnings have been robustly resisted by the industry to protect its last resort advertising space from being squeezed by public messages and pictures.

Article 11 and existing best practices stipulate that pictorial health warnings should be concise and clear, rotated regularly and shocking pictures should desirably occupy 50 percent of the front and back of a cigarette pack. These clear cut specifications of Article 11 are already beginning to make their way into domestic legislation of many countries, with

Jakharani, announced the introduction of pictorial warnings on cigarette packs by January 1, 2010. This has put Pakistan among 20 or more leading countries that have undertaken to implement Article 11 of FCTC. Now one year after the announcement, the decision on pictorial warning is going to come into force on May 31 as revealed by Director General Tobacco Control Cell, Ministry for Health, Yusuf Khan.

This long overdue step needs greater appreciation as Pakistan joins a few countries that have taken this leap forward. The next difficult step is its implementation and monitoring. The government and tobacco control activists now shoulder a heavy responsibility of ensuring effective implementation of pictorial health warnings. This is a crucial tobacco control tool in a country where literacy rate is low. In such a scenario, one picture on a cigarette pack says what thousand words cannot.

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