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Pakistan tops South Asian countries in smoking

By SADIA SAEED March 30, 2009

KARACHI - Chest specialists strongly criticised the government on its failure to take effective measures for the control of tobacco use in the country. They demanded that the "Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of non-smoker Ordinance of 2002" be strictly enforced in order to protect the public health from tobacco, the single largest preventable cause of death in Pakistan.

Shahzad Alam from WHO said that 5.4 million people died last year as a result of tobacco and unless some urgent actions are taken by 2030 more than 8 million people will be dying every year from tobacco.

He said that in Pakistan about 100,000 people die every year as a result of tobacco. Lung cancer is a vital cause of cancer deaths in males followed by mouth cancer. Both these cancers are tobacco related and can be prevented if this powerful addictive substance is avoided. Tobacco use is also a major risk factor for heart attacks, stroke, pneumonia, Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (COPD) as well as 20 other serious diseases, he added.

Quoting a research conducted by the Agha Khan University (AKU), Prof Javaid Khan, Chair National Alliance for Tobacco Control, said that 24 per cent of male and 16 per cent of female college students were regular smokers in Karachi.

The prevalence of smoking in the youth of Islamabad is even higher at 28 per cent, adding that tobacco use is on the increase in the Pakistani youth because of aggressive marketing by the tobacco companies. He said that government of Pakistan was a signatory to Framework Convention on Tobacco control and according to this United Nations treaty our government was bound to take strong anti-tobacco measures in the country, but sadly our government was failing in its obligation.

Prof Khan regretted the recent decision of the ministry to allow designated smoking areas at indoor public places. He demanded that in order to protect its citizen from the hazards of passive smoking, government must ensure that all indoor public places are completely tobacco smoke free.

Dr Muhammad Irfan, Consultant Chest Physician at AKU, urged public to give up tobacco "use" immediately, as most people when they are young do not think about quitting this habit and by the time they decide to give up this addiction it is often too late and permanent damage to health had already been done. By citing an example, he said that if one continues to smoke he is bound to lose 3 months/year of his life after the age of 40 every year. He informed that nicotine withdrawal symptoms only last for couple of weeks which requires strong will power, and by using certain medicines quitting smoking is now much easier than ever before. Dr Mosavir Ansari, president Pakistan Chest Society (Sindh), told according to survey 40 per cent men and 8 per cent women smoke on a regular basis in the country. Highlighting the deleterious effect of smoking on lungs, Dr Ansari said over 90 per cent cases of COPD were caused by smoking, adding this respiratory disease is on a rise in the country and the treatment of this disabling condition is very difficult, with most patients with this condition eventually ending up with respiratory failure, he explained.

Lung cancer is supposedly the direst cause for deaths in Pakistani males and over 90 per cent of such cases are caused directly by the use of tobacco, he added. If the smoker gets normal chest X-ray report it does not mean that his lungs are healthy because X-ray becomes abnormal only at a very advanced stage of the disease.

Prof Mukhtiar Zaman of Khyber Medical College Peshawar said that tobacco was responsible for almost 50 per cent of all cancer cases in the country, yet smoking was still advertised on print media as something pleasurable, cool, glamorous and adventurous. He demanded a comprehensive ban on all forms of tobacco advertising as well as the ban on sponsorship of sports and other entertainment events. "Its revenue from the tobacco ads more

important than human lives?â€” he questioned.

Dr Nadeem Rizvi of Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, Karachi, told that passive smoking is a serious health risk to a non-smoker. He demanded that all public places and public transport should be made smoke free as described in the laws passed by the Federal Cabinet in year 2002, while quoting a recent UNDP study he mentioned that cigarette consumption per head a year is at the highest rate in Pakistan when compared with the neighbouring South Asian countries (Pakistan 629, Sri Lanka 392, Bangladesh 202 and India 119).

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