Turkey: upping up the anti-Turkey

Turkey, strategically placed between Europe and Asia, is understandably seen by tobacco companies as a key market. The struggle to obtain comprehensive tobacco control legislation has been long and strewn with setbacks, as frequently reported in these pages (see Tobacco Control 2001;10:208). As with any legislation passed without a strong, cabinet-wide commitment to effective action on tobacco, there are limited resources, and more than a hint of limited enthusiasm, for monitoring and enforcing the law. Blatant tobacco industry lobbying and promotional efforts aimed at establishing Formula 1 (F1) motor racing, in a country with no popular interest in motor sport, have now gone underground. However, there are frequent signs that tobacco interests are still actively pushing for the establishment of motor racing as a handy means of mass cigarette promotion in the region, and it seems inevitable that a tobacco friendly F1 or equivalent race will come to Turkey within a few years.

Meanwhile, the government has continued to dither over the sale of Törek, the tobacco monopoly. Government and parliamentary sources have indicated desperate lobbying by British American Tobacco (BAT) and others, some of it apparently involving conditions for a takeover that would effectively break the tobacco law. No wonder, then, that doctors, always at the forefront of the campaign in Turkey, have been trying to expand their activities, taking tobacco control to the regions and stepping up pressure to promote tobacco control to a fully recognised national health priority.

Earlier this year, more than two dozen doctors took part in a week long training course in Ankara. Many were clinicians in charge of smoking cessation clinics in their hospitals and health centres. At least, they were when they arrived; but many left the course already planning to take on other tobacco issues in their regions. Evidence of their new activities soon began to accumulate. In Ankara itself, meetings were arranged with parliamentarians and national medical organisations, to press the government over the Törek sale. In Mersin, on the Mediterranean coast, a one hour live television programme was arranged; a training workshop was held for local doctors; and a stand was taken in the centre of the city with a “death clock”, to begin the long task of educating the public. In Trabzon, on the Black sea coast, doctors went public with a major campaign, including a smoking cessation booth at a local health fair.

Meanwhile, the newly inspired medical activists have been monitoring tobacco promotion, all of which is now supposed to be illegal. Even before the end of the Ankara course, students spotted a nearby Gitanes ad on a street sign to a bar, and arrangements were made to pursue this with the authorities. In Bursa, in the west of the country, several child friendly items were located which were more difficult to deal with, as they had not necessarily come from tobacco companies themselves. Instead, they were classic examples of the goodwill of individual cigarette brands being so great, and the social acceptability of smoking being so widespread, that manufacturers of other goods imitate cigarette brand characteristics to
Germany: BAT’s sick notes

BAT Germany recently released its social report for 2003. Where tobacco is concerned, Germany is the sick man of western Europe. Rampant tobacco promotion saturates youth oriented media, especially student publications, and the government is infamous among its European Union partners for taking a fiercely pro-tobacco line at intergovernmental negotiations (see Tobacco Control 2002;11:90, 291–3). So it takes more than average industry duplicity for a German tobacco company to portray itself as socially responsible.

But even German health advocates, accustomed to industry excesses not seen for many years in other western European countries, were amazed to see the front cover of this entirely predictable example of the tobacco industry’s “We’ve changed” public relations policy.

At first glance, and even on a second inspection, the cover of the latest glossy bundle of industry make believe, which differed significantly from that of BAT’s first social report (June 2002), bore an unmistakeable resemblance to a German public health report on tobacco published in September 2002.

Many tobacco companies have parodied the design of health documents, often to try to devalue them, or even use them as crude marketing ploys (for example, BAT’s “Think and Win” scheme in Uganda, taking off the international Quit and Win smoking cessation programme—see Tobacco Control 2002;11:90, 291–3). So it takes more than average industry duplicity for a German tobacco company to portray itself as socially responsible.

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and similar revelations, big tobacco
companies are trying a different ap-
proach. They attempt to set up dia-
logues with health organisations and
others that are trying to address the
massive damage to health caused by
tobacco, as if to suggest that they are
somehow linked together as col-
leagues.
It is hard to escape the conclusion
that BAT wanted to associate itself
with public health policy, to be seen as
an equal voice discussing policy to
tackle Germany’s largest preventable
disease problem, or even just to create
confusion to take the focus off the well
publicised health report. That report,
from the highly respected Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum (the Ger-
man cancer research centre DKFZ),
contains a comprehensive summary of
the current state of knowledge on
tobacco control issues, and sets out
recommendations for effective action
to curb Germany’s tobacco epidemic.
The tobacco industry supports none of
them; and its only pretence at action,
the familiar cosmetic, ineffective youth
campaigns, are probably making
things worse.

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Australia: smoke to be thin
“Smoke to be Thin” screamed the
women’s T shirt that will become a test
of Australia’s tobacco advertising laws
prohibiting the publication of tobacco
advertisements.
Quit Victoria purchased one of the
figure hugging women’s T shirts in
Melbourne; similar shirts were pur-
chased in Perth, Western Australia.
SUPRÉ, with 101 stores across Aus-
tralia, describes itself as a hip brand for
young women. SUPRÉ’s website says
its mission is to be at the forefront of
global youth fashion: “SUPRÉ will
definitely achieve this by focussing on:
more fashion, better music, maximum
excitement, total fun and much more
sex appeal!” However, the sale of the
shirt may breach section 15 of Australi-
à’s Tobacco Advertising Prohibition
Act. The Act defines a “tobacco adver-
tisement” to mean “any writing . . .that
gives publicity to, or otherwise pro-
motes or is intended to promote . . .smoking.”

The Australian fashion industry is
laced with examples of making smok-
ing a chic accessory. Leading fashion
designer Wayne Cooper has been in
the spotlight for antics such as sending
models down the runway with pro-
vocative slogans on T shirts such as
“Can I Smoke In Here?” The most
insidious linkage of fashion and smok-
ing has occurred through fashion
events set up by Philip Morris under
the guise of the “Wavesnet” brand.
SUPRÉ defended its actions, saying it
was a “tongue in cheek” exercise pok-
ing fun at girls who smoke to be thin.
“We are in the business of selling
clothing and putting smart-alec slo-
gans on clothing. I really don’t under-
stand the drama,” said general man-
ger Stephen Patrick. Despite this, the
company withdrew the T shirt:
“Clearly it was inappropriate and the
shirt never went into full production,”
Mr Patrick said. Quit Victoria has
referred the matter to the Australian
government for action under the To-
bacco Advertising Prohibition Act. The
Act carries a maximum penalty of
A$12 000. Around 6000 women die in
Australia each year from smoking
related illness. The T shirt trivialises
the leading cause of preventable death
among Australian women. It seems
almost beyond belief that a clothing
chain that targets young women
would actively promote such an irre-
 sponsible message.

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Sri Lanka: BAT’s hack trick
Despite persistent activity by energetic
and dedicated groups and individuals
in Sri Lanka, there is still little sign of
the government really embracing to-
bacco control; and there are still
frequent reminders of which side
seems to be winning the tobacco war.
One reason may be that in official cir-
cles, and among the business commu-
nity, the tobacco industry is still not
seen as the pariah it is, allowing it
access to activities that only serve to
prolong its ability to suppress the
widespread dissemination of the
health message.

The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka
recently honoured five senior journal-
ists with gold medals for long and dis-
tinguished service, at its annual “Jour-
nalism Awards for Excellence”
BAT uses the same trick in other countries. For several years, its sponsorship of a sports journalism award in Uganda seemed to do the trick, with few journalists willing to mention how utterly incompatible cigarettes were with sporting achievement. But eventually, bad publicity led the Uganda sports press association to give them the push (see Tobacco Control 2000;9:269–70). Sri Lankan colleagues can take heart that despite the seemingly impenetrable alliance between tobacco and the hacks, it can be done.

USA: when Irish eyes are smarting

Irish pubs are best known for their superb Guinness, outstanding music, and pervasive smoking. But, if Irish Minister of Health Michael Martin has his way, smoking will be gone by January 2004 from all Irish workplaces, including restaurants and pubs.

When he announced the legislation last spring, it made headlines throughout America and politicians from Maine to Florida declared, “If Ireland can do it, so can we”. As a hidden benefit of the new law, other European nations may emulate the Celtic anti-smoking tiger. But it’s not a done deal. Opposition is strong from pub owners who cite the supposed economic harm that the recent New York City smoking ban has had on its Irish bars. Over the past few years, I have visited Ireland often, both north and south, exporting elements of the Massachusetts tobacco control successes to my ancestors’ turf. Tom Power, the head of Ireland’s office of tobacco control, understands that the basis of success is changing social norms through clean air policies. He is as politically savvy as any Irish American politician and used his skills to pass the ban. At a recent meeting in the Irish city of Dundalk, Tom asked me to find out if the claims about New York were true.

In June, a meeting in New York City on international tobacco education media campaigns provided that opportunity. It was held near the United Nations on 44th Street and 2nd Avenue. Walking around the hotel you’d think you were in Dublin. On every street corner there was an Irish pub, and on 50th Street and 2nd Avenue there were three. What a research opportunity! After dinner we put together a team of four expert researchers to study how the New York smoking ban affected the Irish bars. We also decided to study the brew.

I was joined by Simon Chapman, Editor of Tobacco Control, whose father had Irish blood, Scott Leischow of the National Cancer Institute, whose mother is a Rooney, a descendant from Cork, and Danny McGoldrick of Tobacco Free Kids, who has relatives from Donegal and holds dual US/Irish citizenship. To avoid biased responses, Simon posed as an Australian bar worker from Sydney, a city considering a similar ban. We surveyed the Irish owners, workers or patrons of four public houses, querying them on the ban’s effect on business, work environment, and rowdiness.

Of the four visited, none had significant compliance issues except one patron lighting up in the last establishment visited. He took it outside after a few silent stares. There was no significant smoking outside, and certainly no sidewalk disturbances, although the number of smokers congregating outside appeared to increase within the hour as evidenced by our return trip past one of the places visited earlier.

None reported any fights or the like, typically saying “This is Manhattan”. Some suggested that bars in the other boroughs probably were not complying.

Three of the four establishments stated that business was off (typically 20–30%) since the ban, but two of those three were quite good natured about the situation, saying essentially that “it is what it is; you just deal with it”. The fourth said business may have fallen off a bit immediately following the ban, but that he sensed it was already coming back. When asked about the potential for the ban in his homeland (Ireland), he replied that “it’s going to happen everywhere” so we might as well get used to it.

None of the bars was packed, but nor were they by any means empty, especially for a quiet Wednesday night, and our sample was taken relatively early in the evening (roughly 9–11 pm). The crowds appeared to grow as the night wore on. In at least one of the establishments, the four of us couldn’t get a spot at the bar, but there were tables available. Their responses seemed scripted, and I thought back to comments I heard in Dublin that the pub owners of New York and Dublin were working together to oppose the Irish ban. A 2002 California study found meals and alcohol tax payments rose after its bars went smoke-free in 1998 and that by 2002, 75% of bar owners and employees said they preferred to work in a smoke-free environment, compared to 47% in 1998. A
recent Irish survey found nearly 70% of bar patrons supported the ban, including 40% of smokers. Of the 30% who oppose the ban, half were non-smokers. It also found that 13% of people said they would visit bars more often for a drink once the ban was in place and 12% said they would visit less often. More interestingly, 20% said they would visit smoke-free bars more often for a meal compared to 7% who said they would visit less often. The place in which the barkeeper said business was coming back poured the best Guinness. Perhaps that’s the key explanatory variable.

One bartender complained about everything from Mayor Bloomberg to anti-smoking zealots. The words he used to describe the Mayor would have shocked any Irish nun. I never met such a complainer in Ireland and concluded that he was really a New Yorker with a brogue. We found workers in all the pubs enjoying the smoke-free environment, no smelly clothes, and less risk of disease.

We concluded our research around 11 pm with a toast to Mayor Bloomberg and the Irish health minister, Michael Martin. To our Irish cousins we can report that the city ban is working well. Stick with it and keep making the excellent brew. After all, “Guinness is good for you”, as the advertising slogan used to say, but “Smoke-free Guinness is even better”.

UK: gutter press

Now that new, stronger health warnings are beginning to appear on British cigarette packs, a new form of health education has been appearing up and down the country. Thanks to the careless habits of many British smokers, who discard massive amounts of cigarette litter on pavements and streets every day, the eye of even the least curious pedestrian is frequently caught by stark messages blaring out from the gutter.

One hardened smoker, a journalist on the tabloid Daily Mirror, admitted he was so alarmed by the stark messages that he resolved to quit. “I was queuing for a packet of 20, minding my own business, when I saw the words screaming at me from behind the counter: ‘Smoking clogs the arteries and causes heart attacks and strokes’ and ‘Smoking can cause a slow and painful death.’ And these aren’t just anybody’s arteries, heart, skin or lungs—the warnings seem to be aimed at me in particular.”

The new series of warnings, one on the front and a different one on the back of every pack, have triggered a large increase in calls to the National Health Service’s smoking telephone help line. More than 10 000 people said they were driven to call by the new labels during the first four months of 2003, an increase of 12% in call levels. The new warnings, introduced in January following a European Union directive, cover 30% of the front of cigarette packets and 40% of the back. A thick, black border adds a further 10% to the warning area. All cigarette packets sold in the UK must carry the warnings by September.

Middle East: religion against tobacco

Tobacco use is a social problem and controlling it requires real change in social beliefs and norms. One thing that has worked successfully in this regard throughout the centuries in countries...
of the Eastern Mediterranean region is religion. Thus, whenever possible, a religious message should be activated at all different levels.

Under a plan of action developed in the World Health Organization's Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO), the fatwa (religious edict) on smoking, issued by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, was summarised and the summary approved by the Grand Mufti himself as well as the national authority concerned. Eighty thousand posters of the summarised ruling were prepared and distributed all over Egypt within five days during the month of Ramadan.

Of these 80 000 posters, 53 000 were distributed to mosques. The poster was also placed in main squares and streets, and Egypt's Minister of Health and Population decided to have it displayed in all public hospitals.

EMRO staff also met the Pope of the Coptic Church, after which he requested a bishop to write on the Christian view on smoking (http://www.emro.who.int/tfi/EMROleads-christianview.htm). This was translated into English and posted on the TFI/EMRO website in connection with the 2001 WNTD.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is one of EMRO's key member states that has exerted tremendous efforts, particularly during the last pilgrimage season (2003), in activating and promoting the religious message in the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In February 2003, billboards carrying anti-smoking messages were posted all around Mecca. Posters, brochures, pamphlets, and stickers were also handed out to three million pilgrims, in six different languages.

Similar activities were also adopted in Medina; 500 000 brochures and pamphlets were distributed as well as 5000 posters and 5000 tapes. Moreover, retailers are required to post anti-smoking messages and health warnings on the front windows of their shops; licences are neither being given nor renewed to tobacco agents, whose operations have now been moved to the outskirts of Medina; 20 restaurants, cafes, and similar establishments were closed during the morning hours, to prohibit them from selling shisha (tobacco mixed with molasses and fruit flavours) to students; anti-smoking committees were formed in various localities to spread the tobacco control message; and due to cultural sensitivities, a committee of women was also formed to carry the message of tobacco control to women.

These awareness campaigns in Medina led to more than 3000 men and 1600 women calling in, requesting information on smoking related issues. In addition, 200 retailers have stopped selling tobacco products. In Mecca and Medina, both smoking and the sale of cigarettes have been prohibited within a certain radius of the holy mosques as well as near schools. In addition, no form of tobacco advertising is now permitted around these holy zones.

Nigeria: experience it, die from it

Last November, BAT launched a promotional campaign called “Experience It” in Nigeria, featuring five Hollywood movies. All five movies screened or advertised—Ocean's Eleven, Matrix, ShowTime, Romeo Must Die, and Collateral Damage—are Warner Bros productions. The promotional campaign was national, reaching six geopolitical regions. At “Experience It” events, young people were given free cigarettes and “starters”, as they tend to be known among tobacco industry people, were helped to light them. The venue was a 500 seat dome with wide screen. BAT defended the campaign, saying that it was to “promote cinema culture”, but health advocates say the campaign was really used to launch new packaging for Rothmans cigarettes. Nigeria has no tobacco control regulation and the government actively supports BAT activities.

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