Austria: small but deadly

If Germany is the bad boy of western Europe, in tobacco control terms, it is high time to meet its little brother. Austria, with just a 10th of Germany’s population, possibly has an even worse record for lack of action to protect its citizens from tobacco. In the past, some of this may have been due to the malign though seemingly cozy participation in government policy of Austria Tabak, the state monopoly that dominated the Austrian tobacco industry until European Union (EU) requirements saw it part privatised in 1997, then sold off to UK-based Gallaher in 2001. Austrian citizens must be among Europe’s worst educated about tobacco, with tobacco related morbidity and mortality rates to prove it. Leaders of its medical profession seem to have been suffering from some form of collective denial or disbelief, and all those delegates from Austrian medical charities who have faithfully attended international meetings seem to have managed to sit through the tobacco control sessions in some sort of delusion that such matters just did not apply back in their comfortable, tolerant home country.

And tolerance is part of the excuse: it is a word often used by health ministry and other officials, and by the mass media, in defending the country’s hopeless position, and when responding to those who over the years had called for some real progress. We Austrians are tolerant people and don’t like to exclude anyone, they would say. Some suggest this line is hypocritical, as it seems to crop up more in discussions about the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy foods, mostly the products of big industries, than in connection with immigration, minorities, and other difficult issues faced by any prosperous, land locked, multi-bordered country. Nevertheless, it has often been seen as an acceptable excuse for not taking effective action.

There have been exceptions, though. In 1980, a burst of enthusiasm by a health minister who was in power for little more than a year saw the first attempt at a national anti-tobacco campaign, but cries of horror at his plans, even though they were relatively tame and included the creative use of athletes and other opinion leaders, were followed by another decade of near inaction and official complacency. Then, in 1992, Michael Ausserwinkler, a physician, became minister of health, sport and consumer protection. The following year, he presented a draft tobacco bill that included a total ban on tobacco advertising. Its potential effectiveness can be gauged by the strength of adverse reaction it generated, particularly in the form of political repercussions. Most alarmingly, he was forced to accept that to prove the effectiveness of cigarette advertising on consumption, an advertising psychologist should be consulted—without knowing that the same expert had designed the advertising strategy of Austria Tabak. There was even a reaction from Germany, where tobacco interests were appalled at the prospect of progressive tobacco control policies being implemented so close to home. A senior figure in the German newspaper industry, was despatched to a personal meeting with Dr Ausserwinkler, warning him that if he proceeded, he would have to face “strong adverse winds” from the international press—an unpleasant threat, given that Austria imports a mass of print and other media from its much larger, German speaking neighbour.

The minister was still not deterred, but a public education campaign he initiated to prepare the ground for his bill drew even more opposition, including threats that football clubs would lose the tobacco sponsorship on which they depended—he was, after all, minister for sport, as well as health. Finally, he paid the classic price of a good health minister with tobacco in his sights, being removed from his post and sent back to serve in his home region, Carinthia.

Last year, another health minister had a go. Maria Rauch-Kallat, a teacher by profession, announced a package of measures on smoking in public places. Compared to other EU countries, not only is it modest, but it is questionable whether it is even up to minimum EU requirements. Worst of all, implementation relies in the early years on that long discredited, tobacco friendly mechanism, “voluntary agreement”, though with the option for the minister to step in with legislation later. But judging by the uproar that ensued, she might as
well have proposed restrictions on
skiing, or eating apple strudel.
The country’s 8000 tobacconists led
the revolt, distributing leaflets bearing a
far from flattering picture of the minis-
ter, and proclaiming, “This woman will
take away your rights. Today she will
forbid where (or what) you can smoke,”
followed by similar, absurd claims that
tomorrow she would introduce equally
outrageous restrictions on what people
drink, and the day after, on what they
eat.
It is unclear what will happen, in the
absence of any other leadership or
encouragement for the lone minister.
Will she be moved on, as Dr Ausserwinkler was? If so, it is hard to
see what different line her successor
could take, given that doing nothing
will no longer be an option as EU and
other international requirements begin
to bite. It is not as if there is no base
at all to build on: a recent Gallup poll
showed that despite years of neglect,
Austrians are not so very different to
other Europeans: seven out of 10 smo-
kers want to quit, a majority of all
citizens would like to see smoking
banned in all restaurants, and more
than two thirds feel “harassed” by other
people’s smoke. Perhaps most remark-
able, in this tolerant land of unrestricted
smoking, more than a quarter of smo-
kers themselves said they found the
smoke of their fellow smokers unbear-
able.
With an aspiring multi-national com-
pany in charge of the old state mono-
poly, and the other big players free to
exploit the market, it is unlikely that
any effective, comprehensive tobacco
control legislation can be achieved with-
out a long, hard, and somewhat un-
Austrian fight, even if it is several
decades overdue.

Kenya: beach party
“helps” tobacco bill
As we know, one of the most serious
dangers of the implementation process
of the World Health Organization’s
Framework Convention on Tobacco
Control (FCTC) is that tobacco com-
panies will make cash strapped develop-
country governments offers they cannot
refuse, to “help” draft the necessary
laws. With this in mind, it is easy to
imagine the bitter disappointment of
Kenyan health advocates last Novem-
ber. In the same week that their country
had proudly announced it was ratifying
the FCTC, they learned of a junket
thrown in connection with the country’s
tobacco bill for more than 40 members
of parliament (MPs), at an exclusive
resort on the coast. Some of the MPs
were of ministerial rank, and one was a
doctor in whose constituency tobacco is
the main crop, an area where health
experts say there are significant, related
health problems.
The seaside jaunt was hardly a secret:
the country’s leading newspaper, The
Daily Nation, carried the story as its front
page lead under the provocative and
revealing headline, “MPs have fun at
Tobacco Bill talks”, complete with a
photograph—of questionable aesthetic
appeal—of some of the MPs entering
the water at the luxurious hotel where
the “workshop” took place. Overleaf,
readers were treated to another pad-
dling picture and some suggestions from
an MP about essential amendments that
would need to be made to the bill,
predictably the industry friendly sort
that we all know so well. There was also
a defensive statement from the public
relations firm reported to have orga-
nised the event, denying that tobacco
manufacturers were behind it, though
failing to confirm who was.

China: tobacco
museum’s “smoky”
health information
The very fact that there is a prestigious
new China Tobacco Museum shows
how tobacco’s status in China is still
far from compatible with the country’s
urgent need for serious, effective
tobacco control. It was inaugurated
in Shanghai City last July, to subdued
local excitement. Funded entirely by
the Chinese tobacco industry, under
the leadership of the State Tobacco
Monopoly Bureau, to the tune of 180
million Renminbi (US$21.7 million),
this is the world’s largest tobacco
museum. The museum spans over 3000
square metres and houses over 150 000

USA: Philip Morris (PM) has quietly phased out the “LOWERED TAR & NICOTINE” on packs of Marlboro Lights, apparently starting in 2003. Over several decades, tobacco manufacturers have been strident in their defence of being allowed to print whatever they want on cigarette
advertisements and packs, citing the vital necessity of informing customers of important consumer
information. Strangely, PM does not appear to have informed its customers about why it dropped
the claim from its packs—perhaps one factor was the guilty verdict in a consumer fraud case where
a judge concluded in 2003 that PM misled smokers by suggesting light cigarettes were safer than
regular varieties. At the appeal hearing last November, PM’s lawyer, former Illinois Governor
James Thompson, was asked to comment on why the label was removed—after all, if there was no
fraud, why remove the statement? He was unable to provide an answer. Although PM has removed
the words, the cigarettes still seem to contain filter vents—which were central to the charge of
deception.
News analysis

recently inaugurated in Shanghai City. Entrance to the China Tobacco Museum, which houses a smoking-themed final "exhibit", which is a version of Virginia Slims, made by RJ Reynolds (RJR), whose non-US operations are now owned by Japan Tobacco. Ironically, internal tobacco industry documents show that in September 1998, Adam Bryon Brown, responsible for RJR International's markets outside the USA, wrote, "We don't target female smokers. We don't encourage anyone, male or female, to smoke. We do recognize that female smoking is increasing in some countries. No one knows for sure why this is the case but it appears to be linked to female emancipation and higher disposable incomes. It is certainly nothing to do with promotional activities by tobacco companies." Tobacco Museum (in Chinese) hosted within that of the State Tobacco Monopoly Bureau, is at http://www.tobacco.gov.cn/bowuguian/index.htm.

USA: the smokin' Marlboro man of Fallujah

In a November 2004 photo essay for the Los Angeles Times, photographer Luis Sinco documented the battle of Fallujah. His images of broken Iraqi bodies and buildings were, like so many others, simply recording the banality of death and destruction, but one picture of the new "Marlboro Man" resonated with news editors across the USA. Suddenly, Marine Cpl James Blake Miller, 20, a "country boy" from tobacco growing Kentucky, was everywhere. His bloodied nose, smudged camouflage, and dangling cigarette portrait was splashed across the pages of hundreds of newspapers. On evening newscasts and in pro-war opinion pieces he was praised as the embodiment of the noble American fighting spirit.

Miller admitted not understanding "what all the fuss is about", but his portrait was iconic, evoking images of past wars, connecting modern day observers to the GIs currently serving in Iraq and to past generations of soldiers fondly remembered in fading photographs. Today's soldiers and marines might be fighting a war deployed by artefacts, depicting the 400 year history of tobacco in China. Its aim is to promote a "positive" image of the tobacco industry and to expand its influence in society. It also aims to celebrate Chinese culture and civilisation.

Representations of a historical ocean going ship and a Mayan temple are on the museum's beautifully finished exterior. Inside, the exhibits further emphasise that tobacco culture "came from abroad". In addition to information on tobacco history, the museum states that one of its main purposes is health protection. An exhibit on smoking and tobacco control measures informs the visitor that smoking is harmful, while a nearby placard claims that due to findings from the 1940s that smoking decreases mental tension, "there is no need to object to cigarette smoking". The exhibit does not mention the addictive nature of cigarettes. Furthermore, most of the "more recent" medical information presented was published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and thus excludes any substantive coverage of passive smoking.

The exhibits range from the agricultural production of tobacco to its importance in the national economy. Elsewhere in the museum, the "gorgeous and colourful tobacco culture" of China is displayed: elaborate water pipes from the 1800s, ornate snuff containers more than 300 years old, pipes from the 1800s, ornate snuff containers more than 300 years old, and historical figures depicting people involved in the tobacco industry.

The museum is smoke-free except the final "exhibit", which houses a smoking bar. Visitors must pass through this area, inhaling second hand smoke, in order to reach the gift shop where they can purchase their favourite brand of cigarettes. The website of the China Tobacco Museum (in Chinese) hosted within that of the State Tobacco Monopoly Bureau, is at http://www.tobacco.gov.cn/bowuguian/index.htm.

New Zealand: alcohol makes fun of tobacco

There is a history of alliance between alcohol and tobacco companies in many countries, based on their shared interests in maintaining "rights" to promote products, and in the battlefield of smoke-free bars. Recently, a small crack appeared in this alliance in New Zealand.

The Dutch and Singapore owned New Zealand brewing company DB Breweries runs a series of advertisements for its beer brand Tui. The advertisements have a standard format consisting of a short statement alluding to a topical issue, with the reply "Yeah right!", indicating scepticism about that statement. For instance, "I saw a great reality TV show last night. Yeah right!". The series aims to tap into popular New Zealand culture.

Towards the end of last year, the company conducted a competition for ideas for the advertisements. Keeping up with public opinion seems to have won the day over defending the old alliance: one winner was, "Those poor tobacco companies. Yeah right!".

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New York Post
SMOKIN’
Marline Lance Cpl James Blake Miller, a "country boy" from tobacco growing Kentucky.

SHANTA VARMA
KAREN CHOI
MALCOLM KOO
HARVEY SKINNER
University of Toronto, Canada;
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Japan: health advocates are still finding ample evidence of the concerted efforts of cigarette companies to recruit young women to smoking (see Japan: smoke clouds over the land of the rising sun. Tobacco Control 2003;12:8–10). This picture shows another recent example of an unmistakably female "starter pack", complete with cigarette lighter. The brand is a version of Virginia Slims, made by RJ Reynolds (RJR), whose non-US operations are now owned by Japan Tobacco. Ironically, internal tobacco industry documents show that in September 1998, Adam Bryon Brown, responsible for RJR International's markets outside the USA, wrote, "We don't target female smokers. We don't encourage anyone, male or female, to smoke. We do recognize that female smoking is increasing in some countries. No one knows for sure why this is the case but it appears to be linked to female emancipation and higher disposable incomes. It is certainly nothing to do with promotional activities by tobacco companies." Tobacco Museum (in Chinese) hosted within that of the State Tobacco Monopoly Bureau, is at http://www.tobacco.gov.cn/bowuguian/index.htm.
much of the world, and Miller himself may be, as the LA Times described him, “unassuming: of medium height, his face slightly pimpled, his teeth a little crooked”, but this man in uniform, smoking a cigarette, was somehow reassuring.

The New York Post, published by war supporter Rupert Murdoch, who has sat on the board of directors of Philip Morris, went further than any other paper, putting Blake’s picture on the front page, and offering that tabloid special, a zinging headline: “Marlboro men kick butt in Fallujah.”

The image certainly reinforced efforts to glamourise smoking and provided the industry a bonanza of free publicity—although one might argue Philip Morris pre-paid this picture with decades’ worth of Marlboro Man imagery. After the photo appeared, newspapers were filled with letters about Miller, some praising editors for celebrating this modern day “hero”, others chastising the papers for glorifying smoking. His mother went on record asking him to stop smoking, but Miller seemed to be using his new fame to get extra cartons delivered to his military unit.

During the first Gulf War, in 1991, Doonesbury cartoon strip creator Garry Trudeau had a much more telling and accurate take on the costs of smoking, in peacetime or during war. The panel reproduced here will not pack the iconic punch delivered by Luis Sinco’s photo of Corporal Miller, but it speaks a truth that still needs telling.

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The Lighter Side

Why don’t they just call them what they are?

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Kenya: beach party "helps" tobacco bill

David Simpson

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