Turkey: upping up the anti

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 Tékel, 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 Tékel 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

All articles written by David Simpson unless otherwise attributed. Ideas and items for News Analysis should be sent to David Simpson at the address given on the inside front cover.

The “death clock”, used to educate the Turkish public about the dangers of smoking.
Image removed
Spot the difference! The covers of the German public health report on tobacco (left panel) and BAT’s own social report for 2003 (right panel).

Control 2000;9:271). Nowadays, as part of their attempts to reinvent themselves after exposure of their past dishonesty in the Minnesota documents and similar revelations, big tobacco companies are trying a different approach. They attempt to set up dialogues 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 colleagues.

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 German 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 purchased in Perth, Western Australia. SUPRÉ, with 101 stores across Australia, 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 Australia’s Tobacco 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 irresponsible 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 tobacco control; and there are still frequent reminders of which side seems to be winning the tobacco war. One reason may be that in official circles, and among the business community, 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 journalists with gold medals for long and distinguished service, at its annual “Journalism Awards for Excellence”

News analysis
No sooner had the Indian parliament declared a ban on tobacco advertising and promotion than Godfrey Philips, Indian subsidiary of Philip Morris, placed this ad on billboards all over Mumbai (formerly Bombay), promoting its Platinum cigarettes. In addition, they got the popular local newspaper Mid Day to distribute leaflets carrying the same ad, with more printed on many pages. The leaflet also announced a contest, for which entrants had to buy the cigarettes. Ironically the leaflet, titled “Understanding Women”, explored the emerging roles of the new Indian woman. As with many countries in the region, cigarette smoking rates are low among women, presenting a tempting potential new market for western tobacco companies.

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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, compared to 47% in 1998. A

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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”. As is the case with any such investigation, a great deal more research is by all means called for. We can’t wait to do a follow up study in smoke-free Dublin next year. Slainte!

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, cafés, 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.

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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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