NEWS ANALYSIS

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10th World Conference on Tobacco or Health

The 10th World Conference on Tobacco or Health was held in Beijing, China, from 24-28 August 1997. It marked 30 years of the tobacco control movement, and was the first time the triennial conference has been held in a developing Asian country. The choice of Beijing as the venue was an acknowledgment of the enormity of the tobacco problem in China and that country's ongoing efforts to combat the ever-increasing threat from tobacco company expansion.

The conference was opened by China's President, Mr Jiang Zemin, in the Great Hall of the People. Approximately 2000 delegates from 110 countries attended the conference, including 800 from China.

"Tobacco: the growing epidemic" was the major theme of the conference, with "Women and tobacco" and "Developing countries" the twin sub-themes. In deference to these themes, the conference made an unprecedented effort to involve women at all levels, aiming, and virtually achieving, 50% representation of women on committees; as chairs, speakers, and discussants; and as funded delegates. Every invited speaker was asked to include a perspective on tobacco and women in their presentation. A large donation from Bionax Hong Kong enabled US\$250 000 to be used to fund delegates mainly from developing and transition countries.

New, unpublished figures were released, spelling out the current toll of death and illness wrought by tobacco and the catastrophic scale of the epidemic still to come, especially in the developing countries of Asia. Other new figures from the 1996 National Prevalence Survey in China showed that the trend of smoking has changed little since the first National Prevalence Survey in 1984; currently 64% of men and 4% of women aged 15 years and above are daily smokers.

Future predictions were gloomy not only for the annual death toll, but for

the numbers of smokers. The current 1.1 billion smokers in the world today will increase to 1.64 billion by 2025—because the world's population will rise, people will live longer, and more women will be smoking.

There were nearly 100 presentations in the plenary and symposium sessions alone, covering tobacco issues from every continent and from diverse viewpoints. Topics included

Chinese President Jiang Zemin addressing the World Conference at its opening plenary session.

A banner at the Beijing airport welcomed delegates to the 10th World Conference on Tobacco and Health.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin meets delegates attending the World Conference. Dr Judith Mackay, vice-chair of the journal's editorial advisory board, is second from left. Source: China Daily, 25 August 1997. [Photo credit: Wang Yan/Xinjuia]

American delegates Matt Myers (left) and Stan Glantz, in relaxing conversation at the conference, before engaging in a heated debate at a well-attended session on the United States tobacco industry settlement agreement. [Photo credit: David Mammio]

litigation, legislation, tobacco promotion, world trade and smuggling, addiction and cessation, young people, school and families, passive smoking, occupational health, tobacco and religion, and the effect of tobacco on economies. The role of health professionals, the United Nations and governments in tobacco control also came under scrutiny.

Arguments were put forward for government regulation on tobacco manufacturing standards, the development of global and regional taxation and regulatory measures, and an international crackdown on smuggling and the corruption that accompanies it. Health professionals were told they must be better role models, and some speakers advocated wider use of nicotine replacement therapies. Sport was urged to boycott tobacco sponsorship. The economic message that emerged from the conference was that tobacco control was good not only for health, but also for a country's economy.

Emphasis was placed on different methods of cessation, for if efforts concentrate only on preventing children from smoking, there will be no reduction in the 200 million smoking-related deaths expected to occur before 2025 in people who already smoke.

One controversial decision was to invite a tobacco industry scientist who stated in his abstract that he believes "the data do not demonstrate that ETS [environmental tobacco smoke] exposure increases the risk of lung cancer or heart disease". The reason behind the decision to invite him was to allow his findings to be scrutinised

in an open session by his peers, four of whom duly provided a robust and highly critical analysis of his case.

Other interesting topics in the conference included religion and tobacco (with Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic representatives examining their beliefs and practices in relation to tobacco), the environmental aspects of tobacco (cutting down trees to cure tobacco; fires caused by careless smoking; passive smoking; rubbish/garbage caused by the billions of discarded cigarettes, matches, and packets each day), and tobacco advertising on the internet.

One novelty was the "How-to" workshops—how to lobby, fund-raise, prepare and present papers, introduce tobacco into the medical curriculum, free sports from tobacco, and how to network electronically. In relation to the last topic, the conference had two internet sites (see page 362 of this issue), and the International Union Against Cancer's (UICC's) GLOBALink computers were in use by delegates throughout the conference.

Even before the conference, three workshops on abstract preparation and paper presentation skills were held around Asia. Delegates were also offered expert help in the presentation of their papers before their sessions, and an on-the-spot slide-making machine was available.

An "empty" session had been held until three weeks before the conference for any last-minute issue of importance, and there was no doubt that this had to be the proposed United States settlement with the tobacco companies. The Resolutions Committee received more submissions

on this topic than on any other. These submissions differed quite considerably on specific recommendations, but there was, however, a broad consensus on the principles as they should apply to all countries, and these were reflected in the resolutions, which apply not only to the United States, but also to the UK, Japan, Indonesia, and other large exporting countries.

It was hoped that all delegates would be able to draw on these principles for their own campaigns, for example, with regard to the current United States settlement. In addition, letters were circulated for delegates to sign, such as a letter addressed to American President Bill Clinton.

The conference received unparalleled global media coverage through the Press Office, which was supported by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Overwhelmingly, delegates expressed their appreciation on the venue, programme content, and many other aspects of the conference. It was organised by the Chinese Association on Smoking and Health and the Chinese Medical Association under the auspices of several international bodies, including the WHO, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UICC, and the American Cancer Society.

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Beauty or the beast

If one delegate stood out more than most in Beijing, it was surely a tall, strikingly beautiful young woman from Sweden who was often to be seen striding purposefully between sessions, particularly those dealing with tobacco smoking among children and women. This was Annika Duckmark, who was crowned Miss Sweden 1996, the second holder of the title since it became a significant part of Sweden's tobacco education programme. The idea of making Miss Sweden smoke-free came up in 1995 when Annika's predecessor, Petra Hultgren, took the title while still a smoker. She was quick to realise that smoking would be detrimental to her image, and she contacted Margaretha Haglund of Sweden's National Institute of Public Health, for advice.