

Smoking and Health

A Statement of Concern from the Department of Medicine, University of Malta Medical School

There can be no reasonable doubt that smoking is now a major public health problem in Malta. The trends of smoking patterns among the Maltese are alarming. Much to the detriment of the health of the Maltese, there has been a steadily rising trend in smoking habits. This is especially evident among school-children, young adults and women in general. It can safely be said that among these groups, smoking has now reached epidemic proportions.

A recent survey among the Maltese population revealed that in the age-group 25 to 29 years, 60% of males and 45.7% of females smoked regularly. This trend is even more worrying when one considers Maltese school-children. In the age-group 14 to 16 years, 29.3% of boys and 14.9% of girls were self-declared smokers. In the majority of these, the age of starting smoking was 13 years, while boys tended to start smoking even earlier. This rapidly increasing addiction to tobacco in Malta is also mirrored by the rate of consumption of cigarettes. Over the years 1980-1982, there was a 15.5% rise in sales of cigarettes and in fact consumption in 1982 stood at a staggering 4.02kg per head. Moreover, unless curbed, these trends will continue to rise as tobacco is more insidiously addictive than heroin. At a population level, the consequences and the burdens that the Maltese health system will have to shoulder in the future will be massive and disastrous.

Addiction to tobacco is a most important and preventable cause of ill-health, severe disability and premature death among the Maltese. The harmful effects of smoking are many and they are not only restricted to smokers themselves but also to passive or 'second-hand' smokers.

Extensive and accurate scientific information supports the following main conclusions:

Smoking causes severe disability and shortens life: In both sexes and irrespective of the age of death, early deaths occur from coronary heart disease, cancer of the lung and chronic bronchitis.

Smoking affects the health of the unborn and the newborn: Smoking retards growth of the fetus and both the birth weight and size are reduced. Maternal smoking also increases the risk of miscarriages, stillbirths and early infant deaths.

Smoking by parents directly affects the health of their children: In the first year of life, chest infections are twice as common in infants whose parents smoke. Later on in childhood, both physical and intellectual development are slower in those whose parents smoke.

Smoking directly affects the health of adult non-smokers: In involuntary or 'second-hand' smokers, pre-existing disease is aggravated, particularly asthma and coronary heart disease. Furthermore, the spouses of persons who smoke have a higher risk of death from cancer of the lung.

Recommendations

This department recommends that Government should accept the responsibility of carrying out more effective smoking control action and of stimulating non-governmental organisations to take action also. Such action should include the promotion of legislation for effective smoking control, the dissemination of information and the institution and support of activities to help people stop smoking. The general objectives should be to reduce the social acceptability of smoking and to ensure a smoke-free environment for non-smokers. The methods through which these objectives may be reached will have to be two-fold: education and legislation.

Education

Anti-smoking health education should be regarded as part of general health education and the favourable aspects of non-smoking should be emphasised more than the unfavourable effects of smoking.

The health education of children starts early at home, in kindergartens and at primary schools. It should be re-inforced at different stages throughout the whole educational period.

Public information programmes should also emphasise the rights of non-smokers. In particular, children and pregnant women must be protected from involuntary exposure to tobacco smoke.

Legislation

This may be seen as an index of Government concern as well as cutting out blatant encouragement to smoke. Legislation should be aimed to prohibit *all* forms of advertising and sales promotion of tobacco, including sponsorship of sports competitions, sportsmen, and raffled cars for *good causes*.

Packets of cigarettes should carry an effective health warning that smoking is dangerous to health. The form of this information should be varied periodically to ensure that it does not become stale.

Every tobacco packet should carry a product description to convey information about the tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide emission products.