

# South African's should 'clear the air' for World No Tobacco Day

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has chosen 'Tobacco Health Warnings' as this year's theme for World No Tobacco Day 2009 on 31 May. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control requires that it's more than 160 member countries adopt tobacco health warnings that meet all the criteria for maximal effectiveness.



This includes warnings that cover more than half of the pack, appear on both the front and back of the pack and contain pictures. For countries in our region, graphic health warnings are already starting to dominate packaging, constantly reminding smokers of the dangers their habit poses.

One of the most important and relevant warnings concerns the health hazards that smoking poses to others through the smoke produced by burning tobacco. Known as second-hand tobacco smoke or environmental tobacco smoke, in enclosed spaces, this smoke is inhaled by everyone, exposing both smokers and non-smokers to its harmful effects. It is a critical problem that threatens the health of our family, friends and co-workers.

Despite a now universal understanding of the dangers caused by cigarette smoke, less has been done to bring attention to the risks of second-hand smoke. According to the WHO, there are about 4,000 known chemicals in tobacco smoke which may cause serious respiratory and cardiovascular diseases often leading to death. Despite this danger more than half of the countries worldwide, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the world's population, still allow smoking in government offices, work spaces and other indoor settings.

An estimated 700 million, or almost half of the world's children, breathe air polluted by tobacco smoke, particularly at home. Second-hand smoke causes many serious diseases in children and worsens conditions such as asthma.

The problem is not that simple to fix either. While some people might consider opening a window at home or installing ventilation at their office, recent studies have shown that efforts to reduce indoor air pollution through higher ventilation rates in buildings do not lead to a meaningful improvement of indoor air quality. In order to reduce the exposure indoors to levels that are considered acceptable, homes and businesses would need ventilation boosted to "wind tunnel"-like rates. According to the WHO, only 100% smoke-free environments provide effective protection.

“The smoke from cigarettes is a toxic gas that, even when confined to a separate room, will find its way into every corner of a home, office, mall or restaurant. Even when the smoke is diluted, the negative health effects are the same,” warns Dr. Khanyi Mzolo, medical director at Pfizer South Africa. “World No Tobacco Day is a reminder to smokers and non-smokers of the dangers that tobacco poses to our health and well being.

“Governments need to recognise the threat of second-hand smoke and people's right to clean air and should implement bans and other tactics such as the health warnings. Smokers on the other hand should realise the harm they cause to others and that the single most effective health decision they can make for them and their loved ones is to quit.”

Smoking bans have already proven to be an effective measure in reducing the harm posed by environmental tobacco smoke. South Africa has taken the lead in anti-tobacco legislation in Africa and is well-placed to be an example to the rest of the continent. The government has placed restrictions on advertising, required warnings on cigarette packaging and banned smoking in public places. It has also signed the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, committing itself to strengthen these measures.

Some examples of measures recently taken in countries from Africa and the Middle East:

KSA - The holy cities of Mecca and Medina have been made smoke free.

UAE - Smoking has been banned in all public places and further legislation is expected including a law that would ban smoking while driving private cars, as well as an increase to the price of a packet of cigarettes as part of a federal anti-smoking law.

Egypt - Egypt, the region's largest cigarette producer, has established smoke-free public places and mandated pictorial health warnings on tobacco packs.

Jordan - Announced a smoking ban in all public places in line with the government's plan to raise health awareness in the country.

Tunisia - The President has declared 2009 the year of focus on tobacco and the Ministry of Health has implemented a ban in all public places.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that at least 200,000 workers die every year due to exposure to smoke at work. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that second-hand smoke is responsible for about 3,000 lung cancer deaths annually among non-smokers in the US.

Exposure to second-hand smoke also imposes economic costs on individuals, businesses and society as a whole, in the form of direct and indirect medical costs and productivity losses. Among employees of the hospitality industry in the EU, exposure to tobacco smoke at work accounts for one death every working day.

Smoke-free policies in the workplace of several industrialised nations have reduced total tobacco consumption among employees by an average of 29%.

Tobacco dependence is a chronic, relapsing, physical and psychological condition which makes quitting both necessary and difficult to achieve. By involving a physician, a smoker improves his or her chance to quit successfully through proper assessment, treatment and support.