Editorial

Tobacco Consumption: The Asia-Pacific Region’s Major Public Health Problem

Wah-Yun Low, PhD¹ and Colin Binns, MBBS, PhD²

Every year on 31 May, the World Health Organization and partners from around the world mark “World No Tobacco Day,” highlighting the risks associated with tobacco use and advocating for effective policies to reduce tobacco consumption. This year, the theme for “World No Tobacco Day” is “Ban Tobacco Advertising, Promotion and Sponsorship” (http://www.who.int/tobacco/wndt/2013/en/). Comprehensive advertising bans lead to reduction in the number of people starting and continuing smoking, and it is one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce tobacco demand.¹

Tobacco use is a risk factor for 6 of the 8 leading causes of death in the world. It is the leading preventable risk factor for noncommunicable disease, which, if left unattended, will cost US$7 trillion between 2012 and 2015 just in low- and middle-income countries.² ³ The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control provided the principles and context for policy development, planning of interventions, and mobilization of political and financial resources for tobacco control.⁴

A study of the disease burden attributable to each risk factor ranked tobacco as second, behind high blood pressure and ahead of alcohol.⁵ This journal has frequently lamented the high burden of chronic disease, and particularly tobacco-related disease, that now causes the majority of deaths in our region.⁶ ⁷ Direct tobacco use is directly responsible for 5 million deaths annually, and a further 600 000 people die each year from exposure to secondhand smoke.⁸ It is killing 1 in 10 adults worldwide and will kill more than 8 million people every year by 2030, of whom 2.5 million would be women.⁹ ¹⁰ Tobacco now kills more people annually than HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis combined, and if the public health community and governments do not take more effective action immediately, tobacco will kill 1 billion people during the 21st century. And all this from a drug that is legal and if used according to the manufacturers’ instructions still kills ruthlessly.

Despite the effectiveness of comprehensive bans, only 6% of the world’s population was fully protected from exposure to the tobacco industry advertising, promotion, and sponsorship tactics in 2010.¹⁰ In the Western Pacific Region, it is estimated that 2 people die every minute from a tobacco-related disease. More than 50% of young people aged 13 to 15 years are exposed to secondhand smoke in public places.¹¹ Only half of all countries in the Western Pacific Region have successfully banned advertising, promotion, and sponsorship. In many countries, antitobacco laws are poorly enforced. In developing countries, the situation is compounded by poverty, leading to less money for essentials, less energy to quit, and social disintegration in the

¹University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
²Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Wah-Yun Low, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Email: lowwy@um.edu.my