

Book Reviews

Tobacco or Health: A Global Status Report

World Health Organization, Geneva 1997

ISBN 92 4 1561 84X

There are currently about 1100 million smokers in the world, comprising about one-third of the world population aged 15 years or above. Eight hundred million smokers live in developing countries with 300 million in China alone. The highest per capita consumption in the world belongs to South Korean males, 68.2% of whom are smokers, while the Danes top the female list with 37%. Approximately three million people die from diseases caused by tobacco smoking. At the present rate of consumption this is projected to rise to 10 million annually sometime in the 2020s. It is estimated that 52 million males and 10.5 million females would have died from tobacco-related diseases between 1950 and 2000. About 20% of all deaths in 1990 were estimated to be due to smoking.

These are some of the dismal statistics contained in a recent publication from WHO. As suggested by the title and amply substantiated in the book, chronic tobacco consumption is incompatible with good health. The book contains a general section on tobacco-related questions such as smoking prevalence, the health effects of tobacco, etc., but the main emphasis of the book is a detailed country-by-country analysis of the current state of affairs as regards tobacco and health. All countries are included, from tiny San Marino (1995 population, 25 million) to China (1995 population, 1.2 billion). World smoking trends are not encouraging. Although annual world consumption of cigarettes seems to have stabilized around about 5.5 trillion, this statistics conceals the fact that per capita consumption is rising rapidly in the developing world while decreasing in the Western world.

Over the years WHO has spent a lot of time and money promoting tobacco control measures. A lot of paper has been generated as well. Between 1970 and 1996 the World Health Assembly adopted 16 resolutions calling for tobacco control measures in member states. The country profiles reveal that the results have been something of a very mixed bag. Some countries have developed longstanding comprehensive tobacco control policies, notably Norway, Finland and Singapore. Other countries such as Australia, New Zealand and France have recently have recently adopted similar programs. New Zealand seems to have been particularly successful in decreasing smoking, adult per capita consumption having declined about 36% between 1984 and 1991. However, in most other countries including Saudi Arabia, there is little cause for optimism. Per capita consumption of cigarettes in Saudi Arabia has

risen notably in the last 20 years. In the period between 1970 and 1972, Saudi Arabia ranked No. 52 in the world, but by 1990 to 1992 it had moved to No. 23, corresponding to about 2,100 cigarettes annually per adult. Saudi Arabia tobacco import costs rose sharply from US\$250 million in 1990 to US\$351.8 million in 1993.

The book contains a wealth of information for the interested reader. For example, the world tobacco production is now conservatively estimated to be in the range of 6.5 million tons. One wonders how much food could have been grown on the land currently allotted to tobacco in order to fill the empty stomachs in the third world.

Henrik Schultz, MD
Department of Oncology (MBC-64)
King Faisal Specialist Hospital
and Research Centre
P.O. Box 3354
Riyadh 11211, Saudi Arabia