



Tobacco could kill a billion people this century, UN health official warns



Tobacco crop

29 April 2011 – Up to one billion people could die this century from smoking or being exposed to tobacco if current rates continue, a senior United Nations health official warned today, urging governments of low- and middle-income countries to adopt the same measures that many wealthier nations have already taken to deter people from smoking.

“A cataclysmic future” lies ahead unless serious steps are taken to curb smoking, said Douglas Bettcher, Director of the World Health Organization’s (**WHO**) Tobacco Free Initiative, stressing that all deaths from tobacco use are entirely preventable.

“There is no need for this. We have tools to help everyone quit,” he told the UN News Centre from Moscow, where tobacco control was the focus of one of the round-table sessions at this week’s global ministerial conference on non-communicable diseases, which wrapped up today.

Dr. Bettcher said an estimated 6 million people currently die each year from either directly smoking tobacco or being exposed to it, with the victims disproportionately likely to come from poorer countries.

“It’s not coincidental” that the highest rates are now being found in low- and middle-income countries where access to health care is often limited and many governments have been lax about regulating the tobacco industry, he said.

“Tobacco companies have ruthlessly and shrewdly moved their targets away from high-income countries in North America and Europe as smoking rates have come down there.”

He described “a vicious circle of poverty” which traps smokers who contract illnesses and cannot afford decent health care and drain limited family income to pay for treatment or even for cigarettes themselves.

Dr. Bettcher said the most successful measures to reduce demand for smoking are those that have been implemented in affluent countries, such as: raising the prices of products through taxes; enforcing complete bans on smoking in public places; introducing large pictorial warnings on products; and setting up national “quit lines” to advise and support people trying to stop smoking.

The roundtable heard from several countries that have had success recently in reducing demand, including Uruguay, where in the past two years alone there has been a relative reduction of 25 per cent in the prevalence of smoking.

“Turkey is another good example. It has gone from weak laws 10 years ago to very strict tobacco control laws today and large pictorial warnings,” Dr. Bettcher noted.

The roundtable participants recommended that, given the strong link between poverty and tobacco use, tackling tobacco use becomes a priority on the development agenda. They also called for all countries to set themselves reduction targets to spur progress on that front.

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