

REPORT

The Curse of Tobacco

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Tobacco smoking is a social evil since it is the main cause of pulmonary diseases and also affects the economy of the society. The present report deals with the hazards of tobacco and suggestions have also been made to remove this evil. It is obvious from this study that most of the burden of disease in the coming years will fall on current smokers which signifies the importance of programmes dealt here to support its cessation.

Tobacco prematurely kills an estimated 3 million people worldwide each year and this figure is likely to rise to 7 million annually by the year 2015. This increase is virtually expected to occur in developing countries where tobacco control activists are rare.

An apocryphal tale told by an executive of tobacco industry is that each doctor who smokes is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to the industry. It is certainly an understatement when it is confined to a small group of doctors and scientists.¹

Cigarette smoking is the active cause of pulmonary illness and death including asthma, influenza, pneumonia, etc. It has significant detrimental effect on both the structure and function of lungs and is the most important factor for the development of chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (C.O.P.D.) besides lung cancer amongst respiratory diseases. It is responsible for an increase in mortality upto tenfolds in cases of C.O.P.D. amongst current smokers than non-smokers.

An international study by Crofton *et al.*²⁻⁶, asked amongst medical students in 42 countries about their knowledge of its health consequences and looked at the implications for medical education, has reported disturbing levels of smoking and widespread ignorance about diseases caused by smoking. In Europe nearly one in five medical students smoke. In Japan the rate is one in three. Just over half of the medical students who smoke agree that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer.

Workplaces and restaurants are the public venues where the greatest number of people are exposed to environmental tobacco smoke. Because of their prolonged exposure^{7,8}, working staff are most at risk. Levels of environmental tobacco smoke in restaurants have been found to be double those in offices⁹. Level in bars is still more than in offices.

The risk regarding smoking increases with the number of cigarettes smoked and the duration of smoking. It causes decline in lung function in adults and impaired lung growth in children and adolescents. The forced expiratory volume per second (FEV₁) attains a peak at 20 to 25 years and then a plateau phase from

20 to 40 years after which it shows a decline. Cigarette smoking shortens this plateau phase and hastens the decline in FEV₁.

Smoking also increases airway hyperresponsiveness and protease enzyme action. This is also responsible for increased acute exacerbations in bronchial asthma and increased incidence of acute respiratory tract infections including influenza and pneumonia among smokers than nonsmokers. Further, maternal smoking and passive smoking is harmful, especially to infants and children.

Tobacco smokers fall under two groups: starters and committed users. From quitting point of view, the committed users are easier to convince because they simply need access to their regular fix of nicotine. Starters are difficult because they are young and their interest in tobacco is social rather than biochemical, to express their individuality, to rebel, to appear more grown up and so on. The tobacco companies target most of their marketing efforts towards the starters.

Suggestions

To bring down this social evil of smoking, it is required:

1. To educate people about the hazards of smoking by way of awareness programmes, group discussions, lectures, through media etc.
2. By way of building public opinion against the advertisement and sponsorships of tobacco companies.
3. A complete ban in public venues and restaurants (if permitted, it should be asked to provide a separate and ventilated space to the smokers).
4. By forcing government to overlook the financial gains and bring in legislation to put a ban on these companies which are detrimental to the health and economy of the society.

The governments of developed countries are trying to curb the activities of tobacco industry. However, the progress is slow and limited to only few of the wealthy countries. The problem is on the rise in the developing countries. Merely a statutory warning, that too presented so insignificantly, is no remedy to this grave problem. It is a big challenge before us, if we really feel that the dream of "health for all" can ever come true.

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