The epidemic of smoking in Saudi Arabia

Sir,

The World Health Organization has described the smoking habit as an epidemic. Smoking is by far the largest preventable cause of death in the industrialized world.\(^1\) Over one million people die every year all over the world as a result of smoking related diseases.\(^2\) It has been documented that tobacco industries have sold, in developing countries, cigarettes containing up to twice as much tar and nicotine as identically named brands sold in developed countries.\(^1\)

In Saudi Arabia, unfortunately, the habit of smoking is spreading. This will bring with it the smoking related diseases and their subsequent socio and economic problems.

Only six published studies have been performed on the Saudi population from 1987 to 1994.\(^4\) A summary of these studies is shown in Table 1. These studies were carried out on selected groups in one area of the Kingdom (Riyadh City), which may not reflect an accurate estimation. According to statistics of the Saudi Custom’s Office, the Kingdom imported approximately 4.5 million kg. of tobacco in 1972, 5.5 million kg in 1975, 27 million kg in 1977 and 36.5 million in 1981.\(^9\) No official statistics were available after 1981. The price paid for tobacco was 117.5, 151.5, 350 and 979 million Saudi Riyals respectively.\(^9\) The above prices are the importation prices and not the market price, which is much higher.

Cigarettes were the most common form of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref. no.</th>
<th>Group studied (Total no.)</th>
<th>No. of non-smokers</th>
<th>No. of current smokers</th>
<th>No. of those who tried smoking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Saudi school boys (434)</td>
<td>259 (61.2%)</td>
<td>51 (12.1%)</td>
<td>113 (26.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Physicians in Riyadh (698)</td>
<td>359 (52%)</td>
<td>115 (16%)</td>
<td>224 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Univ. students in Riyadh (2165)</td>
<td>1372 (63%)</td>
<td>793 (37%)</td>
<td>7 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Medical students in Riyadh males (414)</td>
<td>275 (67%)</td>
<td>134 (33%)</td>
<td>7 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female university students in Riyadh (683)</td>
<td>504 (89.7%)</td>
<td>44 (6.7%)</td>
<td>24 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Secondary school boys in Riyadh (1312)</td>
<td>969 (74%)</td>
<td>158 (12%)</td>
<td>105 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

smoking among all studied groups. The age range of the studied groups was 12-24 years, except the study involving doctors where the age group was 20-50 years. All studies agreed that the most vulnerable age to start smoking was between 12-15 years of age, (i.e. during the beginning of the secondary school). It is widely known that early experimentation with cigarettes tends to increase the likelihood of regular smoking habits when older.\(^1\) All studies agreed that the most common reason for the first cigarette was a friend, followed by other reasons such as imitation of others and stress. All studies agreed that the majority of smokers, including regular smokers, are well aware of the ill effects of smoking on health. Why do they smoke then? The most common reasons are boredom and enjoyment of tobacco due to nicotine effect. The media was credited with being the most important source of information regarding the ill effects of smoking on health, but in particular TV must be blamed for giving examples to the youth on how to smoke: e.g. a cowboy hero who fights with a cigarette in his mouth; an intelligent detective who smokes one cigarette after another while solving a mystery; an executive sitting in a luxury office running a business empire with a cigarette in his mouth. These all tend to link smoking with achievement rather than destruction. Although it is universally agreed that smoking is instigated by a friend; schools played a very rudimentary role in fighting smoking. Regarding the reason non-smokers do not smoke, or why some smokers abandon smoking, is for health and religious reasons. Economy is not a problem in Saudi Arabia, as the Kingdom is the cheapest country in which to buy cigarettes and there are no restrictions on who buys them. We are now facing a ruthless smoking epidemic in Saudi Arabia that is resulting in great economic loss and will ultimately cost the country a lot of money in treating the diseases resulting from smoking. The important reasons for the spread of smoking is the spare time the youths have and bad friends who are the 'instigators'. When a youth is in an atmosphere of smoking he is very vulnerable to start trying drugs and the snowball effect begins. What we really need to do is to begin with the medical profession in general, and physicians in particular, as a professional obligation to anti-smoking exemplars, motivators, and educators.\(^9\) Children and youths spare time should be utilized in more creative pursuits and actions which must be supervised and governed in an
Islamic way. Nationwide anti-smoking programs which include in-depth studies of the problem in the Saudi community are urgently required. By combining both health education and religion in a nationwide anti-smoking program, hopefully we can stop the epidemic before it is too late.

Acknowledgment I would like to acknowledge with thanks Mr. H. Naseer, Commercial Office, Jeddah for economical data.

References

2. Smoking and control strategies in developing countries. WHO Tech Rep Ser, 1983; 695: 8-11

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