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Tobacco control – some perspectives

In the face of overwhelming scientific evidence collected over the last 60 years or so, now there is probably no one, including those in the tobacco industry, who would cast doubts on the health effects on humans due to tobacco use. There is also ample research evidence, including from India, that tobacco intervention improves health.

Tobacco control strategies reduce tobacco use and improve public health. Spurred by clear scientific evidence, the governments of almost all countries in the world agreed on an international treaty, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This is the first ever international treaty on public health piloted by the World Health Organization (WHO). This is the one of the most successful treaties, having been ratified already by 164 members. The treaty enshrines almost all basic principles and requirements for advancing tobacco control. To simplify the matters further, the WHO has developed a concept, MPOWER. Each letter of this word denotes one important tobacco control strategy. The six MPOWER strategies are: Monitor tobacco use and prevention policies; Protect people from tobacco smoke; Offer help to quit tobacco use; Warn about the dangers of tobacco; Enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, and Raise taxes on tobacco.

Looking at the Indian scenario, at least two of out of the six MPOWER strategies have been well implemented. Enforcement of the ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship is reasonably good according to the Act, although there is one notable exception. Two signboards are permitted at the point of sale and with a large number of points

of sale, there is still a lot of tobacco advertisement. Although indirect advertisements have also been banned by the Act, in practice it has not been well defined as indirect advertisements, including brand stretching are merrily going on.

Another strategy well in place is protecting people from tobacco smoke. The notification that came into effect on 2 October 2008 seems to be comprehensive and clear. Of course, it has been challenged by the industry in the court of law; the Supreme Court refused a stay order, so that the notification is already in force.

Monitoring of tobacco use and prevention policies is currently half-hearted. The Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) does a good job of monitoring tobacco use and related parameters among 13–15-yr-old school-going children. Only the first wave of GYTS, however, was conducted state-wise in almost all states. Since then, it has been conducted regionally, but this masks important differences. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey is under implementation and hopefully the field work would be completed in a few months time.

India is seriously lagging behind in warning people about the dangers of tobacco use. Currently, cigarettes and few smokeless tobacco products carry in small print text warning that smoking or chewing tobacco is injurious to health. However, the most common tobacco product in India, i.e. the bidi, does not carry even this warning. According to the Act, the notification for pictorial warning on all tobacco products was first issued in June 2006. Due to industry pressure, the pictorial warnings have been weakened considerably. The Act has even been amended hurriedly in both the houses of Parliament and implementation has been postponed repeatedly.

On raising the taxes on tobacco products, the record is rather dismal. The taxes are high only on cigarette that forms about 15% of all tobacco consumed in India. Taxes are extremely low on bidi, with a loophole for evasion. On smokeless tobacco products where taxes are again not high, tax evasion has been estimated as 85%.

The smoking cessation or the Offer to quit tobacco use is in its infancy in India. In population surveys, the prevalence of ex-tobacco users is about 5%. There are only a few tobacco cessation clinics functioning in India.

In fact the time has come to think beyond MPOWER or FCTC. It is not only necessary to warn people about the dangers of tobacco use. It is equally necessary not to let tobacco companies entice non-users, especially children with attractive packaging and design. Interestingly, the recently adopted guidelines for Article 11 of the FCTC on packaging and labeling, call upon Member States to think about plain packaging of tobacco products.

Another important point is to recognize open and colourful display of tobacco products. This is especially relevant in India where shining, colourful sachets of gutka are found hanging all around to entice youngsters.

It is understood that public health is not compatible with the tobacco industry and therefore ultimately the latter must go into oblivion. How this process can be accelerated is becoming a topic of discussion. No clear strategy has emerged so far, but let us hope that the dire prediction of losing one billion lives in the 21st century to tobacco does not come fully true.

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