

# Health professionals and tobacco control

## The key role of health professionals in tobacco control

Tobacco is the largest preventable cause of disease that health professionals will encounter in their professional lives. A variety of health staff, including doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, dentists and psychologists, can all integrate tobacco control into their professional practice. As health care providers they have a unique opportunity to provide patients with information about the harmful effects of tobacco use and assistance with quitting.

## Health professionals as sources of tobacco control guidance and advice

Health professionals are regarded as reliable sources of guidance and information on health issues. They come into contact with a high percentage of the population. They can advise the young against the initiation of tobacco use and provide advice on quitting to patients. A brief intervention by a doctor has been shown to increase the chance a smoker will stop smoking. They, and other health professionals, can:

- ▶ provide tobacco control advice to patients
- ▶ hand out information pamphlets on tobacco use
- ▶ recommend cessation aids
- ▶ prescribe or recommend medications effective for cessation
- ▶ refer patients to specialist cessation services and quitlines
- ▶ be trained to run individual and group counselling sessions on tobacco cessation.

## Integrating tobacco control into professional practice

Addressing tobacco dependence should be seen as part of standard practice. Questions about tobacco

use can be included in consultations and recorded in patient notes. Wherever possible, cessation advice should be made relevant to a patient's current situation by linking it with the patient's current diagnosis or lifestyle. Reminding patients of the benefits of cessation can dramatically increase their likelihood of successfully quitting. This is even more effective when such interventions are reinforced consistently by different health care providers.

Assessing exposure to second-hand smoke and providing guidance on avoidance are also important, including in settings where tobacco use may not seem to be an issue, such as paediatrics and maternal and child health clinics.

## Health professionals as role models in tobacco control

Health staff can be positive role models for their patients and the community. This is a role the vast majority of them support. But this is difficult if they smoke themselves. Health professionals often have similar or even higher levels of tobacco use to the general population. A survey of health professionals in five countries (Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) of the Eastern Mediterranean Region in 2002–2004 found that 23% were current smokers, despite high levels of knowledge about the harmful effects of tobacco use (1).

According to the Global Health Professions Student Survey, one in five health professions students currently smoke, with much higher rates among men, and around 10% use other tobacco products such as waterpipe and smokeless tobacco (2) Tobacco use by health professionals can affect their credibility as advice-givers on tobacco issues. There is therefore a need for tobacco cessation support to be provided for health professionals. This would have benefits for both the health professionals themselves and for their patients and the wider community.



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## Smoke-free health services

Doctors and other health care professionals can ensure that their workplaces are smoke-free. They overwhelmingly support smoking bans in enclosed public spaces. This protects vulnerable patients, including children and pregnant women, from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke. However, in many health facilities smoking is still not banned and in many where it is, the ban is not fully enforced.

How can smoke-free policies succeed in general if even hospitals and health clinics are not smoke-free? Health staff must lead the way in ensuring smoke-free health services for the protection of all who work in them and attend them. Health facilities are also ideal places for the provision of posters and pamphlets about the risks of tobacco use and for information on quitting.

## Training health professionals in tobacco control

Data from the Global Health Professions Student Survey clearly show that the majority of dentistry, medicine, nursing and pharmacy students believe they have a duty and a role in helping patients quit (2). However, few have received any training in doing so. Around 90% of students surveyed believed they had a role in patient counselling and should receive related training, yet less than a third had received any. It is important that all aspects of tobacco control are incorporated into the curricula of medical, nursing and allied health schools.

## Health professionals as leaders in tobacco control

Health professionals can be powerful advocates for tobacco control. The majority of health

professionals surveyed support comprehensive tobacco control measures. They are a respected and prominent group that enjoy the public's trust and have a leading voice on health matters. They can help convince governments of the need for comprehensive tobacco control policies and programmes to prevent tobacco use, assist in tobacco cessation and reduce exposure to second-hand smoke.

Health professionals can play a leadership role in tobacco control through their professional organizations at the global and national levels. In many countries, national professional associations have already begun tobacco control advocacy activities, including those to promote a smoke-free profession. A code of practice on tobacco control for health professional organizations, developed in 2004, has been ratified by many health professional bodies and is available at <http://www.who.int/tobacco/communications/events/codeofpractice/en/>

## Best practices and the way forward

Health professionals have a key role to play in tobacco control. To achieve this they should:

- ▶ provide guidance and information on tobacco control
- ▶ integrate tobacco control into their professional practice
- ▶ receive training in tobacco control
- ▶ ensure that health services are smoke-free
- ▶ receive support to quit tobacco use
- ▶ become advocates for tobacco control through their professional bodies.

## References

1. *Health professionals survey in the Eastern Mediterranean Region*. Cairo, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2005.
2. Warren CW et al. *Global tobacco surveillance system: The GTSS Atlas*. Atlanta, CDC Foundation, 2009.