

# SMOKE-FREE:

## Health experts urge authorities to save more lives through legislation

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He said the WHO congratulates the Xi'an municipal government for taking this "strong and determined step" to improve the health of the city's citizens and visitors.

"Their (the municipal government's) leadership has been truly exemplary and serves as a source of inspiration for other city leaders who are considering similar moves."

He said the Xi'an authorities have the WHO's full support as they now look to the critically important tasks of implementing and enforcing the new smoke-free regulation.

Health experts say Xi'an has shown that the decision to go smoke-free is not limited to China's biggest and wealthiest first-tier cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. Any city in China, no matter its size, can make the choice.

"We should no longer debate the feasibility of making cities 100 percent smoke-free, but recognize it is a matter of political leadership to protect the health of our citizens," Galea said.

"Cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Xi'an and others around the world have clearly shown that a comprehensive law, fully compliant with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, coupled with rigorous enforcement, public education and strong political leadership, is a sure-win formula for success."

He said 100 percent smoke-free public places work, adding that they are incredibly popular with the public.

Galea called on leaders in other cities in China, as well as the national government, to "save more lives" by passing legislation to ban smoking in all public places "without exception."

Beijing's tobacco control program has been in effect for three years, since June 1, 2015. The regulation prohibits smoking in all public spaces, office buildings and public transportation, and smokers who break the law face fines of up to 200 yuan (\$29).

"The number of smokers in the capital has decreased by 200,000 since the regulations were implemented," Liu Zejun, deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Health and Family Planning Commission, told *China Daily* in January this year.

"The municipal government played a major role in controlling smoking with the cooperation of institutions and departments," Liu said.

Sixty-one hospitals in Beijing have opened smoking cessation clinics, treating 5,340 patients for the first time and providing drug therapies to 2,092.

This year, the smoking cessation clinics have been enlarged and stan-



Men smoke cigarettes at a smoking area outside a shopping mall in Shanghai, in February 2017. China has some 315 million smokers and consumes 44 percent of the world's tobacco. IMAGINECHINA

dards improved, said Wang Benjin, deputy director of the Beijing Health Inspection Bureau.

The adult smoking rate in Beijing is 22.3 percent, or 3.99 million smokers, 200,000 fewer than the figure in 2015, the city's commission for health improvement said on June 6.

It said the number of tobacco control volunteers has approached 15,000 citywide, *Xinhua* and *China Daily* reported. About 1,600 departments and more than 7,300 individuals were punished over violations of tobacco control regulations.

Medical establishments, schools and hotels have a relatively high compliance rate for smoking control regulations, while small restaurants, office buildings and entertainment venues continue to pose difficulties for regulators.

China has some 315 million smokers and consumes 44 percent of the world's tobacco (more than the next 29 countries combined), according to data from the WHO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Globally, tobacco kills around 7 million people a year, according to Kelvin Khoo Chuan Heng, technical officer with the WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative in China.

The Tobacco Free Initiative is a global program to reduce death and disease due to smoking.

Khow told *China Daily Asia*

*Weekly* that more than 6 million of those deaths are the result of "direct tobacco use", while around 1 million are the result of non-smokers being exposed to secondhand smoke.

In China, 28 percent of all adults are smokers (52 percent of men and 3 percent of women), he said.

"The overall percentage is holding steady, however. As the population size increases, the absolute number of smokers has also increased," according to Khow.

He said more than 1 million deaths every year in China are due to smoking, plus 100,000 from exposure to secondhand smoke.

More than 700 million people in China are routinely exposed to secondhand smoke, including 180 million children, he added.

In a bid to cut the number of smokers, the government imposed a tobacco tax in 2009 and 2015.

"The 2009 increase did not translate into higher retail prices (effectively eliminating any change on purchasing behavior), and while the 2015 tax resulted in high per package prices and lower sales, it was not indexed to inflation and, over time, the price impact on behavior has waned," said Khow. "And cigarette sales are again on the increase."

China has banned tobacco advertising in all forms of mass media and prohibited advertisements that target minors.

Khow said China needs better enforcement of point-of-sale and internet advertisements, and to ban tobacco sponsorship completely.

"China has not adopted graphic warning requirements consistent with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, nor has it put in place a national law comprehensively banning smoking in public spaces, including workspaces," he said.

Smoking costs the global economy more than \$1 trillion a year and will kill one-third more people by 2030 than it does now, according to a study by the WHO and the US' National Cancer Institute published in 2017.

That cost far outweighs global revenues from tobacco taxes, which the WHO estimated at about \$269 billion in 2013-2014.

"The number of tobacco-related deaths is projected to increase from about 6 million annually to about 8 million annually by 2030, with more than 80 percent of these occurring in LMICs (low- and middle-income countries)," the study said.

Around 80 percent of smokers live in such countries, and although smoking prevalence is falling among the global population, the total number of smokers worldwide is rising, it said.

The report said the economic costs are expected to continue to rise, and although governments have the tools

to reduce tobacco use and associated deaths, most have fallen far short of using those tools effectively.

Dr Bernhard Schwartlander, former WHO representative in China and now Chef de Cabinet in Geneva, has warned that if no effort is made to reduce the country's smoking dependency, the results could have a devastating effect on the nation's health and economy.

"The rapid increase in costs associated with tobacco use in China is unsustainable," he said.

"Tobacco is the only product that when used as designed actually kills half of the people eventually. So that means a third of all Chinese young men today may actually die of tobacco-related illnesses."

Analysts say the social acceptance of smoking in China, combined with low awareness of the associated health risks, means demand remains high.

Cigarettes are also cheap, with the price for a pack of 20 averaging around 13 yuan.

Earlier this year, Yang Gonghuan, the former head of tobacco control at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, told Reuters: "When it comes to the tobacco industry's obstruction and interference in implementing specific tobacco control articles, China has a serious problem."

Yang made the comment during the launch of her book *Tobacco Control in China*.

In the book, Yang details what she characterizes as the State-owned maker of tobacco products China Tobacco's efforts to thwart control measures by interfering with policymaking, spreading "false science" about the safety of low-tar cigarettes, promoting a smoking culture, and criticizing anti-tobacco advocates for working with foreign organizations.

In 2015, China increased the wholesale tax on cigarettes from 5 percent to 11 percent, which has been credited with 2.3 percent and 5.6 percent drops in cigarette sales volumes in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

But that impact has since been blunted, Hu Teh-wei, an expert on China's tobacco industry at the University of California, Berkeley, told Reuters in May this year. Significant tax hikes were needed to seriously deter smokers — a prospect he said was not currently under consideration in China.

The WHO and UNDP have called for a 50 percent rise in the retail price of cigarettes, followed by future price hikes.

The WHO and UNDP believe this change could lead to 47 million fewer male smokers and 20 million fewer premature deaths as a result. It could also increase government revenue by 442 billion yuan.