

The changing attitude to smoking



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In my last article I wrote about obesity and the increase in consequential diseases such as diabetes. I also referred to the hard work of the health authorities in the Middle East who are trying to combat these health issues by raising awareness via government-funded schemes and campaigns.

One of the more recent initiatives to improve and promote good health and well-being in the region has been the introduction and enforcement of smoking bans in public places. This of course mirrors a trend worldwide and comes in the light of increasing evidence that inhaling second-hand smoke – ‘passive smoking’ – can cause a range of serious medical conditions including lung cancer, heart disease, and sudden infant death syndrome. It also reflects the growing voice of non-smokers like myself, many of whom are no longer prepared to tolerate smoking in public areas at a risk to their own health. The success of smoking bans does none-the-less vary from country to country and the extent to which individual governments are prepared to introduce initiatives and enforce legislation.

Saudi Arabia is an example of one of the more active countries. In recent years it has launched several anti-smoking campaigns, and has now banned smoking

(including sheesha) in all government facilities and most commercial areas including shopping malls and restaurants. The sale of tobacco has also been prohibited to those under 18 and earlier this year the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh banned smoking in and around its buildings – the first such move in the Gulf.

Bahrain has also introduced tough anti-smoking regulations for public areas but probably made world headlines when these were announced in 2009 because they included the ability to fine people for smoking in a *private* car if children were present. This of course presents an interesting extension as to how far future bans might go when it comes to protecting passive smokers – although it has to be admitted that it’s difficult to see how this kind of policy could be properly and regularly enforced.

Iran was at the forefront in introducing bans for tobacco advertising and smoking in public buildings as early as 2003 but unfortunately has been less of a success story as the latter is largely ignored and laws rarely enforced. It’s hardly surprising therefore that statistics have shown that smoking is on the rise among young Iranians.

The smoking of sheesha of course presents a further cultural complication to the debate on smoking in public places for the Middle East. Kuwait for example has a blanket ban on sheesha smoking in public, but I was reading quite recently that it is nevertheless becoming increasingly fashionable amongst young Qatari women –

for whom smoking cigarettes is considered culturally taboo – to smoke sheesha as an *alternative*. A recent study found that just 40% of Qatari women exercise regularly, and socio-cultural factors play a key role in their decisions to participate. It is thus vital to consider these as well as religious factors when developing disease prevention strategies and education programmes.

I firmly believe that education is key to reducing the numbers of smokers in the world and can thus understand why the UAE has gone down the same road as countries like Australia and the UK in carrying graphic images and warnings on cigarette packets as well as increasing the price of cigarettes. It would perhaps be naïve to believe that smoking will eventually become a socially unacceptable habit in society as a whole, but it is encouraging to observe how far we have come in the last 25 years in educating people about the dangers of smoking in general and, for those of us who are non-smokers, the passive inhalation of cigarette smoke. Like much of the Middle East, smoking is now banned in public places in the UK, but I find it incredible to look back and consider that just a few years ago I was quite prepared to eat in restaurants and ride on public transport systems both here and abroad that were often thick with smoke, and with so little regard for my own health. Now, like many others, I wouldn’t consider doing so. The groundswell worldwide in recent years to introduce smoking bans in public places has been a small but significant step towards helping to safeguard everyone’s future health. **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
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