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Tobacco: "A dreadful addiction"

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Speech at the Press Conference on "No Tobacco Day", in Berlaymont

Brussels, 27 May 2010

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to start this Press Conference with a simple message:

tobacco is a dreadful addiction.

People start smoking because they are led to think it's cool. They keep on smoking because it is addictive. They die prematurely because it is toxic.

Tobacco kills 650,000 Europeans every year. This is more than the population of the country I come from or Luxembourg. Tobacco kills 11 times more people than traffic accidents. Many lives could be saved from reducing tobacco consumption.

According to a Eurobarometer survey published today, nearly one in every three citizens smoke.

37% of people aged 25 to 39 smokes.

I am particularly concerned about smoking rates amongst young people. 35% of people aged 15 to 24 smokes:

I am also concerned about the increase of smoking in women. 25% of women in the EU smoke.

Europe cannot passively watch future generations smoke away their health!

What are the challenges we face today:

Despite the existing advertising ban, almost half of EU citizens (45%) claim to have seen tobacco advertisement or promotion in the last six months. This means that tobacco promotion has not stopped. It has just changed nature.

Tobacco packages are increasingly used as marketing tools. Slim and colourful packages are on the market to attract women. Flavourings, like vanilla or strawberry, are added to attract young people and make it easier to start.

Tobacco is still visible in shops and other points of sale. Children and young people get the wrong impression that tobacco is like any other product. And yet it kills half of its users.

On the issue of second-hand smoke, until now, only three Member States – UK, Ireland and Cyprus - have adopted rules for complete protection from second-hand smoke. Nine Member States have a reasonably comprehensive legislation some others have none.

I strongly encourage Member States to adopt rules for complete protection.

The Eurobarometer results published today are encouraging. They show that European citizens are calling for a stronger EU ambition in the fight against smoking:

63 % favour banning advertising tobacco in shops

55 % favour putting tobacco products completely out of sight in shops

Let's take stock of what we've already achieved at EU level:

We have two Directives – one on Tobacco Products and one on Tobacco Advertising. We have two Council Recommendations – one on smoking prevention and another on smoke-free environments.

Furthermore, we have the EU-wide "HELP campaign".

Some Member States have already started to modernise their tobacco policies. For example, the UK and Ireland have decided to ban the display of tobacco in all points of sale. France and Lithuania have banned or restricted certain sweet flavours.

I would like to highlight two areas in which the EU has been a trend setter for the rest of the world:

First, the picture warnings developed by the European Commission are being used by 11 countries – and growing - inside and outside European Union.

Second, European citizens have not seen tobacco sponsorship in Formula One races for a few years thanks to the EU Tobacco Advertising Directive. This is now a global trend.

What more can we do in our fight against tobacco?

The EU tobacco control legislation is outdated. New trends are emerging, science is moving on, tobacco industry is adapting and other global players are progressing.

The US adopted new tobacco legislation last summer that will strengthen US tobacco control considerably in the coming years. Canada has recently banned flavourings as a tobacco additive. Australia recently decided to introduce plain packaging.

While it is useful to learn from other countries, my intention is to tailor EU legislation to the needs of European citizens and European societies.

The Commission services have started to assess how to strengthen the Tobacco Products Directive and will launch a public consultation on this issue before the summer break.

Our intention is to make tobacco less enticing to discourage people from starting to smoke in the first place and to increase motivation for smokers to quit.

This is why the Commission will consider how to eliminate the various ways in which cigarettes, their packages and display are made attractive particularly to young people.

We will also continue to protect the health of non-smokers by encouraging Member States to adopt stricter smoke-free measures.

We will continue to urge all Member States to put picture warnings on tobacco packets. Currently only four Member States use them and a few others are about to join.

To conclude:

The EU can – and should - contribute to new generations living longer and healthier lives in a smoke free Europe.

I am determined to doing every thing in my power to reduce tobacco consumption across Europe and consider measures that can contribute to a clear and effective set of rules to support Europeans' health.

Thank you very much.