

SMOKEFREE EUROPE-WIDE BY 2009

Remarks by
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I would like to start by thanking the organisers of Smoke Free Europe 2005 for their initiative. This has been a valuable day. A link in a process to make Europe smoke-free.

I hope that the audience takes the smoke-free message home, as it is a powerful and positive one. It is about our health, about healthy living, about our environment, a smoke-free environment.

EVIDENCE

The adverse health effects of second hand smoke have been a focus of scientific investigation since the late 1960s when the first published studies of symptoms in families with smokers emerged. Risks of inhaling tobacco smoke were soon demonstrated, first in studies of the respiratory health of children whose parents smoked and subsequently in studies showing increased risk for lung cancer and coronary heart disease in exposed adults. The body of evidence is still growing and our knowledge is getting more precise. The latest studies have been published in the British Medical Journal in 2005.

As the evidence accumulated, governments and international organisations have assembled knowledge and developed policy recommendations in a series of key reports. More recent reports were released by the United Kingdom's Scientific Committee on Tobacco in 1998, the World Health Organization in 1999, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer in 2004.

These reports have all offered comprehensive reviews of the evidence and provided judgments on the causality of associations based on guidelines for interpretation of evidence. The fact that the association is causal is of particular policy significance, as it brings the possibility of prevention through exposure reduction and also carries the inference of culpability for introducing a disease-causing exposure.

We need no more proof to act.

ACTION AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

The Commission has taken for many years action to combat tobacco and to promote smoke-free environments, in particular through tobacco legislation, large scale campaigns, focussing in particular on young people, and through the public health programme.

On the political side, the Health Council adopted in 2002, on the proposal from the Commission, a recommendation on smoking prevention. The Council recommendation calls on the Member States to implement legislation or other effective measures in accordance with national practices that provide protection from exposure to environmental tobacco smoke in indoor workplaces, enclosed public places, and public transport.

The work for smoke-free environments is therefore not the privilege of one Commission department, as it is not only for Ministries of Health at national level.

The EU Action Plan on Environment and Health is a good example of such collaboration. It was adopted by the Commission in June 2004 and is implemented jointly by several Commission departments.

The Action Plan is important for the promotion of smoke-free environments. Its Action 12 seeks to improve indoor air quality through various means. As part of actions under the public health programme, indoor air has been prioritised in the 2004 and 2005 calls for proposals.

As far as environmental tobacco smoke is concerned, the Environment and Health Action Plan also calls for activities to encourage the restriction of smoking in workplaces by exploring both legal measures and health promotion initiatives at European and Member State level. If a legal approach at EU level would be taken, one way forward would be to use health and safety legislation.

The need to address smoking in public places has also been confirmed in the recent tobacco control strategy report produced for the Commission by the ASPECT consortium. The ASPECT consortium included the organisers of this conference. The report also emphasises that prohibiting smoking in all working places would have most impact if enacted in European level.

Furthermore, the WHO Framework Convention of Tobacco Control (FCTC), which is signed by the European Community and all its Member States, calls on the parties to adopt measure for protection of citizens from the ETS in indoor workplaces, public transport, indoor public places and, as appropriate, other public places.

In many countries the availability of data has proven to be very important to promote policy aims, not only to make informed and evidence-based choices possible but also to raise public and media interest. Developing indicators for smoke exposure in various environments can boost the promotion of smoke-free spaces.

There is very little information regarding second hand smoke exposure in homes, workplaces and public places, such as restaurants. Self-reported data have by far been the most commonly used tool to assess the prevalence and intensity of exposure. This is of course fairly limited approach and do not allow us to determine actual levels of exposure.

We would need EU-wide data on the levels of second hand smoke at work and in public places, such as governmental institutions, transportation and food establishments.

Indicators could also shed light on the exposure of some key groups. For example, a study could be carried out in EU several countries, measuring the smoke exposure in discos and other places frequented by young people. Such a study would definitely spark ideas and boost action.

PROGRESS ACHIEVED

Several legislative initiatives have already been taken at national level in Europe. We heard today of the experience from Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Hungary and Cyprus. In Scotland, and elsewhere, there are similar initiatives.

Almost one-third of EU Member States and one third of EU citizens are already enjoying protection from ETS.

The experience from Ireland provides a very powerful case. Not only did it hit the EU public debate at the right time but its success has been well documented providing the analysis of the implementation. The widely available reports review the smoke-free legislation in terms of compliance, public support and the health benefits, which are already accruing from the measure. One year after the initial implementation, the evidence is clear that the vast majority of enclosed workplaces are smoke-free and that clean, healthy smoke-free environments are part of normal work and social life. Also smokers have broadly accepted the ban.

The range of countries that have taken action successfully demonstrates that smoke free policies work in many different settings and cultures.

There is one issue I would like to address. Smoke free policies are for everyone. Too often, I hear that smoke free policies are made only to protect nonsmokers. On the contrary, they benefit both smokers and nonsmokers alike. Allow me to illustrate this with two stories. Different countries, different decades. The same message.

In Finland in the 1980s, a smoker complained during an event organised by the smokers' rights association that the smoking compartments in trains are too smoky as many smokers actually travel in the non-smoking part and only come to the smoking department to have a cigarette. Recently I heard a similar story from France. Smokers also prefer and enjoy clean air, even if they also need their dose of nicotine.

FURTHER ACTION

The Commission is engaging in a process called “Better Regulation”. This translates into 2 actions, among others, which were both present in the conference: the analysis of impact of regulation and the consultation of stakeholders. I congratulate the organisers for their modern approach.

The economic analysis presented here is both interesting and compelling. We benefit not only in terms of health from smokefree policies but also the economy will benefit. In an effort to overcome prejudices and obstacles, it is important to demonstrate the real impact in particular on the hospitality sector.

The presentations by stakeholders demonstrated their concern for health and willingness to promote healthy workplaces. They have strong evidence on their side. Where smoke-free policies have been prudently introduced, they are well accepted and supported, and thus implemented in practice.

“Will Europe act” is the title of this last concluding session.

Yes, and in partnership with a broad range of actors. “Smoke-free Europe by 2009” is a slogan adopted by Commissioner Kyprianou at his hearing before the European Parliament in October last year. With the words of the Commissioner: “No greater scourge to be combated than smoking cigarettes.”

“European citizens merit full protection from smoking, especially in the workplace and other public spaces. I have been monitoring with interest the courageous political resolutions taken in Ireland and elsewhere, and I hope that by the end of my mandate all Europeans will enjoy a similar degree of protection. This effort will, of course, have to be founded on dialogue and consensus on national and European level.”

The Commission intends to put forward in 2006 a document on smoke free environments and related tobacco-control strategies. Before we arrive at that, there needs to a consultative process, building on stakeholder consultations and the experience of the pioneering countries. We also need to analyse the impact of all different options.

A “green paper” will aim at consulting the European Parliament, Member States and stakeholders on the best way forward to tackle environmental tobacco smoke and will discuss the scope of smoke-free environments as well as different policy options.

I was also impressed by the number of ministers and high ranking colleagues from countries that have already implemented measures and the progress made during the last 12 months. The justification of our cause is clear.

I again thank the organisers. The Commission will continue from and build on the dialogue created during this conference so that the decisions of the first semester of 2006 can be politically well formulated.