Tobacco or Health

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Implications of the tobacco dependence syndrome for smoking control programmes

Motivational and psychosocial treatments for tobacco dependence, while valuable, are not sufficient to solve nicotine-related problems, which usually require a pharmacological approach. There is also a need for training programmes for health workers and major educational campaigns on the nature of tobacco dependence to be directed at opinion leaders, teachers and the public at large.

It is well known that many smokers find it difficult to give up the use of tobacco, and smoking has always been regarded as strongly habit-forming. In 1973 a WHO expert committee stated that tobacco was a dependence-producing substance, although its psychotoxic effects were considered slight compared with those of other dependence-producing drugs. Since the late 1970s, research has led to a thorough review of tobacco dependence. In 1988, a report by the United States Surgeon General described it as a drug dependence with both psychosocial and pharmacological features. The report stated that the drug in tobacco which caused dependence was nicotine, that nicotine was psychoactive, i.e., mood-altering, and could act as a reinforcer to motivate tobacco-seeking and tobacco-using behaviour, that tolerance to nicotine could develop, and that the drug caused physical dependence that usually led to a withdrawal syndrome if abstinence was attempted. The pharmacological and behavioural processes that determined tobacco addiction were characterized as being similar to those determining addiction to drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

Tobacco dependence as a substance abuse disorder

Before it was established that nicotine was a psychoactive drug, tobacco dependence was not fully recognized as a substance abuse disorder. In 1980, however, the American
Tobacco or health programme

The World Health Organization and its 166 Member States are committed to the attainment of tobacco-free societies. In January 1990 the Organization created the Tobacco or Health Programme, within the Division of Health Protection and Promotion, to ensure worldwide activities aimed at halting the use of tobacco.

Under the Programme, national tobacco control schemes have been elaborated. Collaboration with countries through their ministries of health facilitates the sharing of experience and the provision of policy and strategy guidelines and support. Interdisciplinary and intersectoral strategies include the training of national personnel in the development of tobacco control activities. There is close collaboration with other programmes, such as that for the prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, so as to contribute to the promotion of healthy life-styles.

A second approach aims to convince governments, the United Nations system, nongovernmental organizations, the population at large, and certain target groups, such as the health and teaching professions, politicians, decision-makers and youth, of the extent and seriousness of the tobacco problem, the need to act, and the feasibility of taking action that will lead to a tobacco-free society. This approach not only attempts to play a direct role in the global discouragement of tobacco use and the creation of a social attitude favouring the non-use of tobacco, but also serves to adapt information from technical programmes for public use and worldwide dissemination through the media. The World No-Tobacco Days are organized as part of this endeavour. This approach uses the experiences of countries that have already developed tobacco control policies and programmes as examples for other countries.

Thirdly, the World Health Organization is establishing a technical database, country by country, as a repository of international information on the subject of tobacco or health, and as a support for other components of the Programme. This database will develop mechanisms to collect, validate and distribute essential information, which will be categorized into two general areas: one to support national and international tobacco control programmes, the other to serve in the global monitoring of aspects of tobacco production and consumption, national and international tobacco or health activities, and disease trends associated with tobacco use.

In the different areas, specific research will be conducted and the results published. The Programme disseminates information produced by WHO expert committees and publishes Tobacco alert, a quarterly newsletter, described in World health forum, 11: 125 (1990).

Psychiatric Association, in its Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, included tobacco dependence as a substance abuse disorder. Subsequently this classification was developed and strengthened. In the WHO International classification of diseases (10th revision, 1990), tobacco is dealt with in the section entitled "Mental and behavioural disorders due to psychoactive substance use".

Implications for smoking control strategies

The serious nature of the tobacco dependence syndrome requires that increased priority be given to action for smoking control. This means that a heightened awareness of the problem is necessary among decision-makers and the public at large.
The avoidance of dependence should be emphasized as a reason for young people to remain non-smokers. An individual's decision to start smoking or not is, in most cases, a question of whether or not to acquire a dependence disorder.

Educational needs

Opinion leaders, teachers and the public at large should be informed about the nature of tobacco dependence. The subject should be covered in training courses for professionals who participate in delivering tobacco control programmes. Especially important in this regard are people with responsibilities in smoking cessation activities, who need a comparatively deep insight into the problem so that they can improve their ability to assess smokers. They should also be trained to adopt the most appropriate therapies, in particular the new ones with pharmacological components.

WHO and the Swedish National Smoking and Health Association have produced a video film, Hooked on tobacco?, which is intended to stimulate and facilitate educational and training activities. It shows that most people who smoke daily suffer from a dependence disorder and explains how this affects a smoker's life. The viewer is thus helped to understand how and why nicotine dependence supports the maintenance and obstructs the cessation of smoking. The film also indicates that effective therapies are available. It serves as an introduction to smoking control in general and smoking cessation in particular, and can be used as a primer for discussion and as a basis for deeper studies in smoking and health matters.