

World Cancer Day 2021: Prevention, awareness and accountability in tobacco control

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Today is World Cancer Day. For 21 years, this day has been synonymous with solidarity, compassion and public awareness.

The year 2020 was unique, not only for the cancer community but for everyone globally as we have all faced the challenge of COVID-19. In a year full of uncertainty, the work done by millions of people in healthcare and research worldwide was brought into the public domain. We also witnessed how fragile health systems are and how cancer care has experienced serious disruptions: early detection and treatment therapies were postponed and the overall care of people living with cancer was delayed, in particular because of fears of getting sick, as cancer is one of the comorbidities that can lead to more serious cases of COVID-19.

On 4 February 2021, we celebrate the 21st anniversary of World Cancer Day¹. This day has always been the occasion to offer a message of hope for cancer patients and survivors, particularly this year, thanks to the development of vaccines and the relief they will bring to health systems and those working on the frontlines. The pandemic period is not over, and we will pay the consequences for the next years, but we have now turned a corner and we now know that governments must invest in health systems, in supporting health workers and in the programmes and policies that promote health. The pandemic has shown us how health is fundamental to human security. We must plan ahead and use the momentum generated by the pandemic to address health concerns and invest in prevention strategies that can reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases in particular, a key strategy being strong tobacco control.

'Corona-washing'

In 2020, the tobacco industry sought to take advantage of the COVID-19 situation^{2,3}, misleading policymakers and the general population with so-called corporate social responsibility initiatives to whitewash its image, by providing, for instance, respiratory machines during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly ironic as tobacco consumption, a risk factor for cancer, is also associated with an increased risk of developing severe COVID-19 infection⁴. As a public health organization, UICC⁵ aims to raise awareness of every product that increases the risk of developing cancer.

Furthermore, we see that the tobacco industry is claiming that their new products (e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products) are safe by using scientific rhetoric combined with the image of innovation and technology⁶. This industry uses the language of the tobacco control community to sell their so-called smoke-free alternatives. As a health community, we need to expose these tactics which undermine public health and work with decision makers to ensure that

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countries develop and enforce strong tobacco control measures in line with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).

Prevention, awareness and accountability in tobacco control

More than 8 million people die every year because of tobacco consumption, 3 million of these from cancer⁷, and we must continue our efforts to prevent those cancers by limiting the industry's ability to sell tobacco and disseminate misinformation about their novel products. However, the detrimental effects of tobacco are difficult to apprehend particularly for young people since cancer is a disease with late onset, meaning the signs and symptoms of cancer predominantly manifest later in life. Thus, smokers often cannot comprehend the fact that half of them will die from cancer, and the other half will have other series of health issues, such as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases), cardio-vascular diseases and multiple comorbidities associated with smoking. In addition, it is not just smokers who are at risk, as secondhand smoke kills 1.2 million people every year.

In recent years, the global environmental movement, made famous by Greta Thunberg's #FridaysForFuture, has involved and committed young adults around the world to address one of the globe's most pressing problems. This engagement is needed in tobacco control. A young generation can rise to build awareness about the misinformation and the tactics used by the tobacco and e-cigarette industry to maintain and expand its client base, thus exposing millions of people to addiction and poor health.

The health implications of tobacco consumption place a tremendous burden on health and health systems, but the industry always offers dubious arguments about the rights of people to use their products freely. The industry argues that if their business is restricted, then millions of jobs and revenue will be lost. However, these arguments are part of the industry playbook⁸, which has been developed with the collaboration of PR and marketing agencies to facilitate the dissemination of false or misleading information on novel and emerging tobacco products.

What we depict here is an entire chain that must be dismantled, and where every stakeholder must

be aware that tobacco products are not only harmful to consumers, but harmful to other people who are exposed to them, and that there are serious human rights and environmental concerns related to the tobacco industry.

Preventing the use of tobacco by the next generation is crucial. Countries, governments, UN agencies, NGOs and citizens must support and act towards the implementation of efficacious and cost-effective measures to curb and stop the use of tobacco products. This can be done through taxation, ending marketing campaigns targeting teenagers and young adults, expanding smoke-free areas, and preventing the industry from lobbying governments and the public health sector, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

We hope that 2021 will be the time when smokers refuse to be the clients of an industry which makes children work, where their products pollute oceans and endangering the tobacco farmers⁹ or harms economies¹⁰. Our goal is for smokers to quit and not switch to other tobacco products. We also urge policy makers and government representatives who will convene during the WHO FCTC Conference of the Parties in the Hague in November 2021 to take action on increasing taxation, on regulating tobacco products including emerging novel products or ban all activities related to the commercial marketing from the tobacco industry and the associated funded groups, including the foundation for a smoke-free world.

World Cancer Day, celebrated today, is the occasion to tell cancer advocates that tobacco is not only a health issue, but also generates important social and financial costs, it is a widespread global issue that we have to address now.

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