

AUB academics: New law on tobacco control should adopt strong provisions and contain no loopholes

Live demo shows that smoking and no-smoking sections in the same room not effective

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Lebanon should adopt a strong tobacco control law to protect its citizens, especially its children, from health hazards, said AUB academics and members of the Lebanese civil society, during a press conference in which they announced their position vis-à-vis a draft law on tobacco control, currently being studied by Lebanese parliamentarians.

The conference was held at AUB to an overflow audience of academics, media representatives and members of civil society. MP Ismail Sukkariyyeh and Dr. Walid Ammar, the director-general of the Ministry of Health also attended the news conference.

Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), Iman Nuwayhid, opened the conference saying: "Academic and research institutions have a big role to play in positively influencing policy-making."

The draft bill under study is currently being discussed by Parliament's Justice and Administration Committee, and researchers and health professionals are lobbying legislators to adopt strong provisions and wording in the law, in order to maximize health benefits to workers and the general public. Lobbyists fear that legislators are not basing their decisions on science and evidence-based research.

In 2005, Lebanon ratified the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which proposes a variety of policies necessary to protect the health of citizens. However, Lebanon has still not shown enough commitment to its implementation, according to the AUB Tobacco Control Research Group, an inter-disciplinary team of researchers who have been conducting in-depth studies on tobacco use and its health effects since 1999.

"We need total bans of smoking in closed/indoor public places, since designated areas for smoking have been scientifically proven to be ineffective in protecting the health of people," said Rima Nakkash, assistant research professor at the AUB Faculty of Health Sciences and coordinator of the AUB Tobacco Control Research Group.

"Secondly, a total ban on advertising AND promotion of tobacco is essential. This includes bans on sponsorship, sale of branded items, and distribution of free samples, since they target youth mostly. Finally, the new law should call for large-sized, rotating health warnings with clear pictures, in line with the FCTC international treaty."

Nakkash noted that all countries that have already implemented these measures have seen "immediate health and financial gains," both in the country's national health bill and in increases in profits to the hospitality sector.

"After all, it is the Lebanese government's duty to offer people a healthy workplace and a clean environment in which they could eat, shop, or enjoy cultural activities." "The tobacco industry should not be allowed to undermine/weaken tobacco control policy."

Nakkash added that the law will not be against smokers.

These measures are the minimum requirement for complying with the FCTC, said panelists at the conference.

Nakkash also noted that Lebanon has one of the weakest tobacco control policies in the Middle East. In fact, studies have shown that 150,000 children and 350,000 adults will die prematurely because of smoking or secondhand smoke in Lebanon, unless tobacco control measures are improved.

"Since Lebanon signed the FCTC and passed it as law, it is obliged to comply with all its provisions," said Ammar, the MOH director-general. "Otherwise, it would be passing a law that is in conflict with one of its own laws."

Dr. Ghazi Zaatari, who heads the department of pathology and laboratory medicine at AUB and is a member of the tobacco control research group, backed Nakkash, saying: "Three out of the four most lethal cancers in Lebanon have a direct link to smoking. They include lung cancer, bladder cancers, and mouth and throat cancers... Last week, a plane crashed, killing 90 people and the entire nation was gutted by this news. How will you react if I tell you that the WHO estimates that 3500 people in Lebanon are expected to die this year due to smoking-related causes?"

Zaatari highlighted the need to raise awareness about the dangers of nargileh smoking which match those of cigarette smoking, which exposes consumers to more than 4800 toxins and cancer-causing agents. Nargileh smoke contains a lot of the same carcinogens found in cigarette smoke, he noted. Similarly, law-makers should be able to protect their citizens from second-hand smoke or passive smoke, which increases a person's risk for various types of cancers.

Zaatari decried the fact that tobacco companies are pushing this cancer-causing habit onto Lebanese school students. Studies have shown that 60 percent of school students in Lebanon are smokers of cigarettes or waterpipes, as opposed to only six percent in England, he said.

"We urge Lebanese policy-makers to devise laws that prohibit the advertisement of tobacco products in the media in order to prevent the ongoing spread of this dangerous social trend and protect the future generations," he said.

Zaatari also quashed the notion that a law banning smoking in closed, public places would put a dent on the tourism sector. "This argument is totally rejected. For God's sake, does Lebanon have more conferences or tourism than Dubai? Does Beirut receive more tourists than Paris, or do its citizens go to pubs more than Irishmen? All these countries have adopted bold laws that control tobacco use, sale, and promotion," he said.

"No country has lost any business by adopting smoking bans in closed, public areas," said George Saade, who heads the National Tobacco Control Program at the Ministry of Health.

"Even Turkey, which is similar to Lebanon in its culture and lifestyle, did not experience any negative impacts. In fact, most countries register an increase in business."

Rania Baroud, deputy director of the Tobacco Free Initiative (TFI), highlighted the widespread use of waterpipes among teenagers, calling it an underestimated health hazard. "Even Turkey, who invented the nargileh has adopted a complete smoking ban," she said.

She also warned that more than 75 percent of Lebanese children are being exposed to second-hand smoke either in their own homes or when they go out, which puts them at greater risk for a slew of diseases. "Exposure to only half an hour of second-hand smoke is equivalent to smoking between one and four cigarettes," she said.

Baroud noted that TFI had reached an agreement with Catholic schools which will gradually phase out smoking even in open-air areas. But Baroud warned that 75 percent of the total smoking hazards that teenagers are exposed to comes from the hospitality sector.

"The solution lies in a Lebanese law that fully adheres to the FCTC signed in 2005, such that shop owners would prohibit the sale of cigarettes to teenagers under 18, and smoking in closed public areas and cigarette advertisement would be banned," said Baroud. "Any law that does not adopt these measures will be a corrupt law."

As for Wael Hmaidan, executive director of IndyACT –The League of Independent Activists, he approached the subject from the premise that social justice is a right for all.

"The freedom of an individual ends as soon as he/she starts causing harm unto others," said Hmaidan. "Non-smokers have the right to live in a clean environment without being subjected to the threat of cancer."

At the end of the press conference, Mark Helou, a graduate student at AUB and Izzat Jaroudy a research associate at the mechanical engineering department conducted a live five-minute scientific experiment to examine the effectiveness of separate smoking and non-smoking areas in the same room. A machine located on the "smoking" side of the room was used to smoke a number of cigarettes, and the resulting increase in pollutant levels was measured in both the smoking and non-smoking areas. Within 10 minutes, the levels of the cancer-causing pollutant were the same on both sides of the spacious room, demonstrating that non-smoking areas provide no protection from second-hand smoke.