

For Immediate Release



AUB holds reception for MPs who endorse a strong tobacco control bill being discussed in Parliament

Beirut, Lebanon- 2/12/2010- Twenty-two Lebanese MPs endorsing a strong tobacco control bill under discussion in Parliament attended a special reception and social advocacy gathering, held at the American University of Beirut on November 30, 2010 in the evening.

Under the patronage and in the presence of Health Minister Jawad Khalifeh, AUB Tobacco Control Research Group in collaboration with the parliamentary committee for public health, labor, and social affairs, and the National Tobacco Control Program (NTCP) invited parliamentarians to thank them for their support and raise awareness about the importance of passing a strong tobacco control law that will protect the health of youngsters and adults.

MPs from various political blocs attended the gathering including: MPs Atef Majdalani (the chair of the public health, labor, and social affairs parliamentary committee), Walid Khoury, Imad Hout, Henri Helou, Ali Osseiran, Tammam Salam, Edgard Maalouf, Alain Aoun, Simon Abi Ramia, Ahmed Fatfat, Agop Pakradounian, Qassem Abdel Aziz, Nadim Gemayel, Samir Jisr, Naji Gharios, Ghassan Moukheiber, Ziad Aswad, Ammar Houry, Abdel-Latif al Zein. Dr. Ziad Maalouf, representing MP Sithrida Geagea, Johnny Tawily, representing MP Sami Gemayel, Mohammed Jreidi, representing MP Bahiya Hariri, and George Saade who heads the NTCP also participated in the event.

From the AUB side, the gathering was also well-attended, attracting dozens of faculty members and students, including most notably AUB President Peter Dorman and Provost Ahmed Dallal.

Dorman welcomed guests recounting AUB's own experience in implementing an anti-smoking law on its premises. Smoking was initially banned inside buildings in 2000, he said. Later in 2008 and despite some resistance, the ban was expanded to include the entire campus, barring a limited number of designated outdoor smoking areas.

Dorman emphasized AUB's endorsement of a strong tobacco control law, saying: "I would like to urge upon you that now is the time to ensure we pass a strict tobacco control law, and I'm enormously impressed by the gathering of parliamentarians who are in accord with that view."

On all the tables around the room, were placed samples of cigarette boxes from various countries showing pictures warning against the harm caused by tobacco use. Pictorial warnings such as these are will become imprinted on cigarette boxes sold in Lebanon once the new law is passed.

Dr. Ghazi Zaatari, Chair of WHO's Tobacco Regulation Study Group and member of Tobacco Laboratory Network, then spoke of the dangers that have arisen from current tobacco policies. "Is it right for 3,500 people to die annually in Lebanon because of smoking-related causes, [that comes out to] 10 people per day?" he asked. He also criticized the pervasive and uncontrolled tobacco advertisements in

the country that are displayed everywhere: on TVs, billboards, and in front of schools and universities. Dr. Zaatari also stressed the need for pictorial warnings on cigarette boxes in order to dissuade people from smoking.

MP Majdalani talked of the beginnings of the tobacco control law, saying that, since 2004, he had been pushing for the law to be passed. However, because of security events in the country between 2005 and 2006, the law had been postponed. Majdalani explained that, once the law is passed, smoking will be banned in public places, and it will also be illegal for those under 18 to buy cigarettes or nargileh.

Minister of Health Mohammed Khalifeh praised AUB for sticking to its own non-smoking policy. He also highlighted some alarming figures about cancers caused by smoking, in particular bladder cancer among men. "There is a serious issue when it comes to health in Lebanon, and people need to be warned of the health dangers that can arise from smoking; once the law is passed and enforced, people will follow it."

Rania Baroud of Tobacco Free Initiative explained the major points of the bill, saying "After six months of the passing of this law, smoking will be banned in public places, tobacco advertisements will be banned, and pictorial warnings covering 40 percent of each box will be placed on all cigarette packs sold in Lebanon." She then invited the MPs and those in attendance to sign a petition in support of the bill. Most of the heads of parliamentary blocs had already signed the petition that was also endorsed by the MPs present at the gathering, which is the first of its kind in the history of tobacco control advocacy in Lebanon.

The AUB Tobacco Control Research Group, which was created in 1999, had held a press conference in February 2010 in which it called for passing a strong tobacco control law that meets the requirements set by the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control, which was ratified by Lebanon in February 2005.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has 606 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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