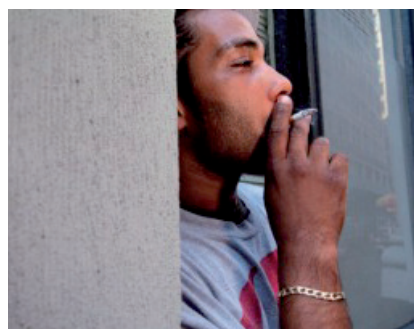


Africa heading for 'smoking epidemic'



According to some researchers, tobacco addiction is rapidly increasing in Africa.

Dr Twalib Ngoma, president of the African Organisation for Research and Training in Cancer (AORTIC), says that Africa is on the brink of a smoking epidemic. 'Africa is in the area of the pre-epidemic and so we should prevent the epidemic,' he said. 'We should not wait until there is an epidemic and then work on it. We should prevent the epidemic.'

Tobacco-related cancer was one of the key topics discussed at a recent international cancer conference in Tanzania. One of the reports presented there warns that African nations are set to undergo the highest increase in the rate of tobacco use among developing countries.

The report, released jointly by the American Cancer Society and the Global Smokefree Partnership, says that more than half of African countries will double tobacco use within 12 years if current trends continue. But the authors say that there is still time to do something about it.

'For the first time in history, we have the tools in hand to prevent a pandemic,' says Dr Otis W Brawley, chief medical officer of the American Cancer Society. 'Smoke-free public places are one example of a low-cost and extremely effective intervention that must be implemented now to protect health.'

As well as Kenya, Niger also recently introduced a smoking ban in public places. Mauritius also recently passed a law that the American Cancer Society says is close to meeting the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)

standards, ranking the laws among the most robust anti-smoking measures in the world.

But the report says that many other countries have not taken any action. For some countries, introducing a smoking ban would face too much popular opposition.

Dr Ngoma says that while many governments in Africa have signed up to legislation on tobacco, it is difficult to enforce those laws. 'We have legislation in Tanzania... but enforcement of that legislation is not easy. Tobacco companies are all too powerful. They lobby and lobby and lobby.'

He also blames advertisers who he says are hooking in Africa's younger generations. 'Tobacco companies are targeting poor, developing countries in Africa. If you drive from the airports to most towns you will see a lot of billboards promoting tobacco, saying that if you smoke you are going to be successful.'

The American Cancer Society agrees, saying that the tobacco industry in Africa tries to hold back legislation. It says the companies try to convince African governments that tobacco is important to economic activity and that raising taxes on cigarettes and implementing smoke-free laws will result in revenue and job-losses.

The organisation says that in Kenya, for example, the tobacco industry has issued a legal challenge to a strong smoke-free law passed by the parliament. And in Zambia, they say that British American Tobacco has helped to dilute proposals for a smoke-free law.

But British American Tobacco say that this accusation does not reflect reality. They say that while they were consulted on the draft bill in Zambia last year, the bill has never been finalised. They add that they support tobacco regulations in the countries they do business in as they recognise that tobacco consumption poses real risks to health. Their policy on public place smoking is that they support the creation of smoke-free areas but that a ban on all indoor smoking in work and public places goes too far.

Huge unmet need for contraceptives in Uganda

Limited access to family planning services, fears about side-effects, opposition from partners, and religious beliefs have led to Uganda having the highest unmet need for contraception in east Africa. And research indicates that this unmet need for family planning is highest among illiterate women.

According to Dr Moses Muwonge, the national reproductive health commodity security coordinator at Uganda's Ministry of Health, 41% of women in Uganda have an unmet need for contraception. Rates in neighbouring countries Kenya and Tanzania stand at 25% and 22% respectively. Rwanda has a rate 38%, while Ethiopia's is 34%.

Rates keep increasing, but Muwonge says the ministry has not got enough resources to tackle the problem. The government will need up to US\$25m to adequately meet the contraception needs of its population by 2015, he added.

Mass vaccinations to fight yellow fever in Africa

Nearly 12 million Africans deemed at highest risk from yellow fever are to be vaccinated against the virus, which can cause explosive epidemics in cities, says the World Health Organization

The vaccination drive will span three countries – Benin, Liberia and Sierra Leone – and will take about a week.

'Yellow fever is a viral haemorrhagic fever which can cause devastating epidemics, particularly in urban centres,' said Rosamund Lewis, project leader in WHO's yellow fever initiative.

Vaccination is the best way to prevent yellow fever, which is hard to diagnose in early stages and for which there is no specific treatment, according to WHO.

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) has contributed US\$103million toward a UN vaccine stockpile for yellow fever. France's Sanofi-Aventis, Brazil's Biomanguinhos, and the Institut Pasteur de Dakar are the three suppliers of yellow fever vaccine pre-qualified by WHO for UN-wide use.