

# Helping the Public Kick the Habit

## Promoting Smoking Cessation

BY BARBARA RUBEN

Responsible for some 1.2 million deaths each year—a number equivalent to 140 deaths an hour—tobacco is the number one killer in the member states of WHO's European Region, which includes all the countries in the NIS and CEE. According to WHO statistics, in the NIS and CEE alone, one out of every five men between the ages of 35-69 will die of tobacco-related diseases such as lung cancer or cardiovascular disease—twice the rate for middle-aged men in Western Europe. And Russia, with nearly 70 percent of all men and 30 percent of all women using tobacco, has one of the highest rates of smoking in the world. The numbers for the rest of the NIS, while currently lower, are steadily rising as more and more teens and women fall prey to the lure of the advertisements glamorizing smoking that blanket billboards, bus stops, and other public places.

For Peter Anderson, regional advisor of WHO/Europe's Tobacco Free Initiative, the key to transforming these bleak

figures lies in educating people so they stop smoking—or better still, never start. “If we really want to have an impact on reducing the number of deaths by tobacco, we have to change the cultural views about smoking and the image of the cigarette,” he stated at WHO's “Health Reporting 2000” conference in Copenhagen last December. “Although the USSR did develop health policies for the

country as a whole prior to its dissolution, most NIS initiatives to organize health promotion or educational programs have been fragmented,” Anderson said. “In the NIS, leaders are confronted with building stable economies and tobacco control issues must compete for attention on crowded political and economic agendas. Anti-tobacco interest groups must fight a

long, uphill battle for fundamental change in social and economic structures and create a unified front throughout the region,” he continued.

Still, over the past decade nascent smoking prevention and cessation efforts have taken root across the region. In Martin, Slovakia, for example, children began a campaign to get their elders to stop smoking. They crumbled cigarettes into a trash bin after collecting them from people on the street in exchange for oranges. Soap operas airing on television in Kazakhstan extol the virtues of a healthy lifestyle—including kicking the smoking habit. And in Armenia, a new NGO founded by doctors is lobbying for tighter government regulations on smoking and for more extensive public education programs about both the ill effects smoking has on people's health and the economic toll it takes on family budgets.

### Success Stories: Educational Programs Aimed at Young Teens

Educational efforts—especially when aimed at children in the low teens—have proved effective in the United States, according to a recent study published in the March 2000 issue of the American Journal of Public Health. During the study, which began in 1993, doctors in Massachusetts interviewed 1,000 non-smokers between the ages of 12-15, asking if they had seen anti-smoking advertisements. Four years later, 592 of the teens were surveyed a second time. Although approximately 25 percent of them had become smokers, rates among those who had viewed the anti-smoking ads when they were 12-13 years old were roughly half as high as the overall rate.

The impression made by smoking prevention advertising in the CEE and NIS has the potential to be even greater, says Sushma Palmer, DSc, president and chair of the Center for Communications, Health and the Environment (CECHE), a non-profit group that has worked in both regions to promote smoking cessation. “The impact of anti-smoking programs in the region has really been quite tremendous, more so than in the United States or Western Europe. I think it's partly because people have not before been exposed in an engaging way to educational messages,” she explains.

### Television Helps Bring Anti-smoking Messages to the Public

CECHE has produced numerous public service announcements (PSAs) that air on television in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, and trains members of the media and healthcare professionals to make PSAs with the hope that once they are empowered with new video skills they will



Produced by the Russian Health and Environment Foundation, this 1996 PSA depicting a woman tossing her cigarettes into a trash bin challenged viewers to take responsibility for their own well-being. The caption reads, “I choose health—now it's your turn.”

Photo courtesy of CECHE.

continue to use mass media to help educate the public on a variety of health issues.

The first PSAs began airing in Russia in 1993. One played on viewers' fear of smokers being less attractive to the opposite sex. Newer spots feature sound bites of ex-smokers seeking to persuade others to quit. Titled "Taking Charge of Your Health," the five 30- to 60-second television spots focus on increased breathlessness, social and familial ostracism, and the need to stop using cigarettes as an emotional crutch.

In addition, the group used smoking as a focus for a 30-minute segment in its television series *A Family Year*, shown in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Russia. In the series, viewers are introduced to four ordinary families and follow their lives over a six-month period as they talk about their views on health, nutrition, smoking, and child care, and try to put into practice measures that could prevent them and their children from developing some of the major diseases of our time. Another 10-part television series—*Elixir of Life*—shown in the Czech Republic focused an episode on smoking.

Both Ostankino TV (Russia and NIS) and the Open Skies Network of Internets have broadcast the PSAs and series. The Open Skies Network includes about 170 stations viewed by more than 130 million people throughout the NIS. According to surveys and focus groups conducted for CECHE, the programs have been quite effective—80 percent of smokers in Russia, as well as 10 percent in the Czech Republic, have reportedly decreased their intake after seeing the anti-smoking programming.

"There is no one best education method," Palmer says. "Without follow-up in community-based interventions, a smattering of media messages won't make a huge impact. You need a barrage of messages from various sectors to really make a person ready to quit."

### Partners Help Citizens Kick the Habit

With a smoking rate much higher than the national average of 38 percent, nearly half of the inhabitants of Martin, Slovakia, indulge in tobacco at least occasionally, exposing some 19 percent of the town's children to second-hand smoke on a regular basis. Responding to these alarming statistics, the AIHA-sponsored Martin-Banska Bystrica/Cleveland partnership, in cooperation with the Martin city government and with the support of the mayor, has begun an array of anti-smoking initiatives geared toward teaching the public about the dangers of smoking. In addition to public information campaigns, the town has also established a Smoking Prevention and Cessation Advisory Center (see *Connections*, www.aiha.com, June, 1999) to



In the Czech Republic, the popular television series, "Elixir of Life," features a unique format that involves the studio and home audiences in a dialogue on a variety of health-related topics. A combination of informative interviews with leading experts, audience question and answer sessions, and scenes from real-life situations, "Elixir of Life" touches on all aspects of healthy lifestyles. In this photo, Marcela Hoffmanova, the show's producer/host is asking questions of the studio audience.



This scene from "Elixir of Life" shows Czech teens enjoying a cigarette before being interviewed for an anti-smoking segment.



Behind the scenes at the "Elixir of Life" studio—Hoffmanova chats with an expert on nutrition and healthy cooking techniques before a segment while cameramen prepare their equipment.

Photos courtesy of CECHE.



provide counseling services and education about smoking prevention and cessation. School programs on the dangers of smoking have been implemented and the city has been participating in WHO's World No-Tobacco Day programs for several years. Additionally, Dr. Elena Kavcova, of the Jessenius Medical School at Martin Faculty Hospital, presented the partnership's anti-smoking work at the Global Health Council's Annual Conference in June in Arlington, Virginia.

AIHA partnerships in Central Asia are also working to help alert citizens to the dangers of smoking. In a public service film produced by Dr. Bakyt Tumenova, deputy governor of Pavlodar



This billboard glamorizes cigarettes, encouraging passersby to "Achieve new heights in the new year," while issuing a small warning about the hazards of smoking across the bottom. The ad was featured in the dramatic series on healthy lifestyle choices, "A Family Year," which was broadcast to more than 20 nations between 1996-1998.

Oblast in Kazakstan, the camera zooms in on a group of adolescents smoking in a crowded corridor. A heavy blue haze hangs over their heads. Suddenly the video cuts to a stark black-and-white poster of a child's head superimposed on a lit cigarette; below this image a warning label reads: "Smoking is harmful to your health."

Tumenova hopes this and other anti-smoking videos being broadcast in Kazakstan will help curb the high incidence of smoking in the area. In 1996, an estimated 70 percent of children in Semipalatinsk Oblast between the ages of 9-16 smoked and, in 1995, tobacco use is estimated to have killed some 25,000 people—roughly 20 percent of all deaths nationwide. Of this number, 20,000 were male; almost half the deaths of men aged 35-69 are attributed to smoking.

Twice a year, Pavlodar Oblast holds a month of "action against smoking among children and teenagers" and uses all forms of promotion such as conferences, workshops, training events, lectures combined with videos and other visual aids, role playing, and question and answer sessions. "These efforts are especially effective when carried out by teenagers themselves working with other teenagers," Tumenova said.

In June 1999, Kazakstan passed a resolution to further study ways to decrease tobacco use, including anti-tobacco laws and then in November, the Pavlodar regional government passed legislation to ban smoking inside public establishments, educational institutions, cultural centers, medical treatment and



Also part of "A Family Year," this image of a young Hungarian girl was featured in an episode on the ill effects of smoking. The series followed the daily lives of several families and illustrated how healthy habits such as exercising, eating a well-balanced diet, and avoiding tobacco could be incorporated into their lives.

Photos courtesy of CECHE.

preventive institutions, and closed sports facilities. No-tobacco areas have been created adjacent to medical, educational, cultural, and sports facilities.

The Institute of Oncology and Radiology in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, is also working to raise public awareness of the dangers of smoking. The institute began some of the nation's first anti-smoking campaigns eight years ago when Dr. Zakir Kamarli, director of the facility at that time, spearheaded the project by appearing in numerous PSAs and newspaper advertisements expressing his concern about rising rates of smoking and incidence of lung cancer, which jumped from the fifth-leading form of cancer in 1970 to the second in 1998.

In addition, physicians from the institute visit Bishkek schools to teach children about the hazards of smoking and to distribute leaflets and posters. Nurses also talk to patients about nicotine addiction, prompting many to seek more information about tobacco consumption. Kamarli says that he hopes these initiatives will lead to earlier cancer screening and to anti-smoking education programs being integrated into the hospital's primary care program.

### WHO and Governmental Programs

Last year WHO launched the European Partnership Project on Tobacco Dependence. The three-year project currently targets three Western European nations and Poland but is designed to be easily transferred to other countries. One of the program's main activities is communicating to both smokers and health-



care professionals about the hazards of tobacco use. Plans are under way for television and print material on smoking cessation to be distributed throughout the region.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the rate of premature mortality in Poland due to smoking was among the highest in the world, with tobacco contributing to 40 percent of the nation's deaths. Due in large part to intensive campaigns organized by WHO and local healthcare institutions, the smoking rate has declined substantially—from 46 percent in 1986 to 39 percent in 1993. During the 1990s, nearly 2 million smokers kicked the habit in Poland.

WHO also sponsors World No-Tobacco Day each year on May 31 when cities throughout the world—including many in the NIS and CEE—hold anti-smoking rallies, contests, educational events, and other activities. This year's theme focuses on the depiction of tobacco use by the entertainment and sports industries. Additionally, WHO and the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) have teamed up to produce radio and television PSAs promoting smoking cessation and other healthy lifestyle choices, which are now airing in Romania and Uzbekistan (see "Encouraging Target Populations to Take Responsibility for Their Health," page 16).

The Republic of Georgia's Public Health Department is combining advocacy for tighter tobacco legislation with an increased emphasis on education programs to cut the country's smoking rate, which—as in most other NIS and CEE countries—is growing quickest among young people. WHO estimates that among people between the ages of 17-30, smoking prevalence is around 40 percent for females and 40-50 percent for males. In 1995, smoking was estimated to have caused about seven percent of the country's deaths, almost all of them among males. Tobacco is estimated to cause one out of every five deaths among males aged 35-69, with roughly one-third of those cancer-related.

"Tobacco use is a huge problem in our country," admits Avtandil Jorbenadze, Georgia's minister of health and social welfare. "There are a lot of diseases in the country—cancer, for example—that are associated with tobacco use. These diseases are rising and another important problem is increased numbers of children, teenagers, and women smoking," he notes. In addition to school-based prevention programs and creating smoking cessation centers, the government is now considering a proposal to restrict smoking in public places and control tobacco sales. Taxes have already been increased on tobacco products.

"We have proposed certain limitations on advertising tobacco products on TV. . . for instance, only allowing them to be run late at night. Then, after 2001 we hope to gradually

abolish tobacco advertisements all together," Jorbenadze says. "We are facing strong resistance to the decree. . . Tobacco companies are spending a lot of money to promote the use of their products in developing countries. So, that is why we have had such an uphill battle trying to promote this. I am hopeful that we will win."

### Obstacles to Smoking Reform

As Jorbenadze noted, despite strides made in Georgia and across the region, curtailing tobacco use continues to be an uphill battle. Ubiquitous advertisements portray smoking not only as socially acceptable, but glamorous and sophisticated as well. "Tobacco companies are taking advantage of the peculiarities of the history of this time and the extreme vulnerability of the societies in the Eastern part of the European region," explains Franklin Apfel, regional advisor, communications and public affairs for WHO/Europe. "There is a tremendous urge to become democratic

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Above: Posters designed by Martin, Slovakia, youth as part of the Martin-Banska Bystrica/Cleveland partnership smoking cessation initiative to commemorate the opening of the Smoking Cessation Center in April 1999.

Right: AIHA Executive Director James Smith is interviewed by a member of the media prior to the opening ceremony.

Photos: AIHA archives.

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and free . . . They talk about freedom, they talk about economics, they talk about liberty. People are looking at tobacco as a way of being modern,” he continues.

CECHE’s Palmer has run into a parallel impediment in her organization’s quest to run anti-smoking material. “In Russia in particular, there’s a general feeling that people have such few things to enjoy, they don’t want smoking taken away. So there’s a tendency in the media to be less accepting of anti-smoking information,” she says.

Palmer also notes that although many of the television stations given the anti-smoking PSAs and dramatic series also run cigarette ads, no station has refused to air the pieces. But she adds the continued presence of tobacco advertisements dilutes the effect of CECHE’s spots.

Advertising revenues can also influence the mass media’s editorial policies. According to Natasha Shulepina, a correspondent for Pravda Vostoka, a newspaper in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Uzbek journalists’ salaries come primarily from advertising income; therefore, more tobacco ads may mean less

editorial content about the harmful effects of smoking if journalists are afraid their salaries will be affected by the stories they write.

And education about the harm tobacco does apparently hasn’t filtered far into where the information may do the most good: medical schools. In Russia, a 1993 survey found that 48 percent of male medical students and 14 percent of female medical students were smokers. In Slovakia’s medical schools, 2.3 percent of first-year students smoke, but that low number rises to 14.6 percent by their fifth year, according to Martin, Slovakia’s Kavcova.

For Kazakstan’s Tumenova, such statistics only strengthen her resolve to continue to educate citizens in her oblast and advocate for better understanding of the hazards of tobacco worldwide. “The most effective effort is preventive work against smoking,” she says. “I think it is a global challenge, and only combined efforts made by many people can result in a positive outcome.”

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