



# Informing and Empowering Children to Prevent Early Addiction

BY PAUL CSAGOLY

*Paul Csagoly was the Communications Officer for the Tobacco Free Europe in the WHO Regional Office for Europe; he is currently a consultant for WHO.*



Russian cigarettes can be bought in Moscow for as little as six rubles (or 21 US cents, at summer 2001 exchange rates), while American brands like Marlboro command five loaves of bread.

Six-year-old Annette lives with her parents in the small Hungarian town of Kalocsa. Although Annette loves her mother, she never liked it when her mother smoked cigarettes—especially at home—because it smelled bad and made her eyes hurt. But, since many people smoke in Kalocsa, Annette thought that smoking was a “normal” thing to do when you grew older.

Then one day Annette’s kindergarten teacher, Agnes Kovacs, started talking about cigarettes and how they affect our health. Ms. Kovacs showed Annette and the other students two pictures, one of a strong, red, healthy “nonsmoking” cherry and one of a sickly, grey cherry that smokes to illustrate the human lungs. Annette also heard a fun story about a sick dragon who got better after he gave up cigarettes. After the lesson, Annette and her classmates got to bring home some stickers, a new T-shirt, and a little pamphlet with pictures of the cherries. Maybe smoking is not so normal, she began to think. “Smoking smells and it’s unhealthy,” she now says. “It’s very dangerous and it causes lung cancer, too. I won’t ever smoke.”

When she got home, Annette showed her stickers, T-shirt, and pamphlet to her family and told them what she had learned. When later asked whether the talk with her parents had any

effect, Annette replies, “My mother smokes less now and she never smokes in the same room as me anymore.”

## A Novel Hungarian Program

The education Annette received was part of the Hungarian *Smoking Prevention Project in Kindergartens*. Inaugurated in 1992, the program provides information on the effects of smoking to hundreds of children aged 5-7 who attend kindergartens throughout the country. Lessons are taught by teachers, who are given educational materials, as are social workers, parents, nurses, and doctors. One result is that many children now ask adults not to smoke in their air-space.

“It is a fantastic program and has had great results,” says Kovacs. “You need to start teaching children about the negative effects of tobacco at this age to prevent them from smoking later.” Her own two children—now aged 11 and 13—went through the program. “They have never tried smoking and they don’t like seeing their friends smoke,” says Kovacs, herself a nonsmoker.

The idea behind the program originated with Tibor Demjen, department head of the Smoking or Health Program at Hungary’s National Institute for Health Promotion. “Some 67 percent of current smokers in Hungary started between the ages of 12 to

21,” says Demjen. “Even some kindergartners have already tried smoking.” Demjen and others believe that prevention activities should begin at an early age, since basic behavior patterns are imprinted on day care- and kindergarten-aged children. “That is why we created the program,” he adds. “Organized smoking prevention activities should start to be conducted at the age

continue, about 250 million children living today will eventually be killed by tobacco,” says Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general. Today’s European children are starting earlier—most before the age of 1—and smoking more than did European children in the past. European children are children living in the 51 countries of the WHO European Region. In high-income countries, 80 percent of new smokers start in their teens.<sup>1</sup>

To track tobacco use among students aged 13–15 worldwide, the *Global Youth Tobacco Survey* (GYTS) was developed by WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). An early report describes data from 12 countries. Ranking highest in the survey for students who had ever smoked—70 percent—and current smokers—30 percent—were Poland, Russia (Moscow), and Ukraine (Kiev). In Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, overall, boys were more likely than girls to use tobacco and one-fifth or more started smoking before age 10.<sup>2</sup>

Passive smoking—or breathing second-hand smoke—is a now-proven serious health risk. WHO’s new *Air Quality Guidelines for Europe* states that there is no evidence to support a safe level of exposure and that chronic exposure leads to significant increases in deaths from lung cancer and cardiovascular diseases in nonsmokers. Each year, passive smoke is responsible for 300,000 to 550,000 episodes of lower respiratory illness in European infants. Passive smoke also reduces the birth weight of babies born to nonsmoking mothers, and recent evidence suggests that it is a risk factor for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). It also irritates the eyes and respiratory tract, as well as increases the risk of pneumonia and bronchitis.<sup>3</sup>

WHO believes that nearly 700 million children breathe air polluted by tobacco smoke, particularly at home. That means half the world’s children are living in an unhealthy environment simply from exposure to second-hand smoke. Most have no choice, and, as a result, many suffer serious long-term health effects.

In many European countries, over 50 percent of the homes contain at least one smoker. The GYTS found exposure of youth to Environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) to be very high, with 67 percent in Poland and 50 percent each in Kiev and Moscow. In Poland responders report most often smoking at social events. In Kiev and Moscow, while most youth said they believe that ETS is harmful and that smoking should be banned from public places, many youth still smoke in public where there are no smoking restrictions. “The environment in which most people live, therefore, is contrary to their desire for freedom from exposure to tobacco smoke,” concludes the GYTS.

24 rubles (or 83 US cents). In Armenia, most brands of cigarettes are equivalent to

when the brain begins to be receptive to messages that influence present and future behavior.”

After arranging for pilot testing in the early 1990s, Demjen launched the program country-wide in 1992, presenting it to kindergarten teachers, as well as to the Minister of Health. By 1997, 200 kindergartens were involved in the program; by 2001 that number had risen to 500, which is 10 percent of Hungary’s total number of kindergartens, and expansion of the program continues.

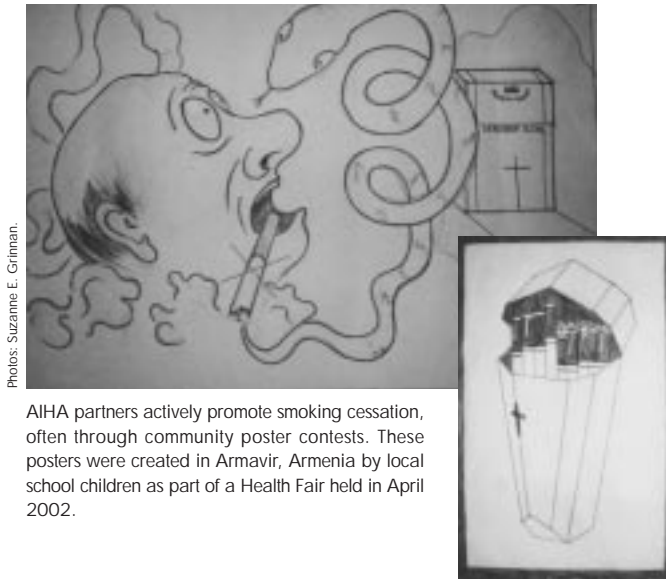
### WHO’s Tobacco Prevention Efforts

“Youth clearly represent tomorrow’s tobacco business and markets,” said Dr. Paul Nordgren of Sweden’s Tobacco Control Programme. Basically, for the tobacco companies, today’s youth are needed to replace adults who will die from smoking in the near future. And that’s a lot of replacement.

The annual number of tobacco-related deaths worldwide is now 4 million—expected to increase to about 10 million by 2030—making tobacco the single largest preventable cause of death in the world. In Hungary, 44 percent of adult males and 21 percent of adult females smoke, and each year, over 30,000 adults die due to active or passive smoking. “If current patterns



Photos: Suzanne E. Grimman



Photos: Suzanne E. Griman.

AIHA partners actively promote smoking cessation, often through community poster contests. These posters were created in Armavir, Armenia by local school children as part of a Health Fair held in April 2002.

### Painting a False Picture

Since the transitions to new economies that began in the early 1990s, many NIS/CEE countries have faced the growing presence of tobacco company activities, including the aggressive recruiting of youth through advertising, promotional tactics, event sponsorship, and educational campaigns—repeating a process begun decades ago in the West.

Tobacco company strategies were recently revealed through industrial disclosure documents made public during legal hearings in the United States, explains Douglas Bettcher, coordinator of the WHO-led Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Strategies range from marketing cigarettes as part of “becoming an adult” to adding honey or comic strips to tobacco products. To establish brand loyalties at an early age, these messages equate cigarettes with rebellion, self-expression, self-confidence, independence, freedom, adult identity, and masculinity or femininity, depending on the target audience. For example, leaked documents from 1975 show that the strategy used by Ted Bates and Company—the firm that created advertisements for brands such as Lucky Strike for the British American Tobacco company—was to get teenagers to smoke by linking cigarettes with adult initiation rites such as “shaving” and “wearing a bra,” as well as taking illegal drugs, having sex, and drinking beer.

RJR Nabisco’s “Joe Camel” campaign is a particularly appalling example of targeting youth, notes the United Kingdom’s Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). Modeled after James Bond and Don Johnson’s character on the late 1980s television show *Miami Vice*, Joe Camel profoundly influences the very young. One study shows that nearly one-third of 3-year-olds matched Joe Camel with cigarettes and that by age 6 children

are as familiar with him as with the Mickey Mouse logo on the Disney Channel. The Joe Camel campaign catapulted Camel cigarettes from a brand smoked by less than 1 percent of US smokers under age 18 to a one-third share of the youth market—and nearly 1.5 billion dollars in annual sales—within three years. Companies have also paid highly visible figures such as Sylvester Stallone to display cigarettes in movies targeted to youth.

WHO Director General Dr. Harlem Brundtland has called the tobacco epidemic a disease “communicated through advertising, through the example of smokers, and through the smoke to which non-smokers—especially children—are exposed.” The good news is that kids like Annette are getting messages that support health and counteract advertising ploys; the bad news is that smoking is on the rise for girls, especially in the NIS and CEE.

### Girls Smoking More

Girls in these regions are the victims of a world newly open to external messages from tobacco companies, messages that falsely equate sexiness—not to mention good health, fitness, relief from stress, beauty, and slimness—with smoking. In many NIS/CEE countries, beautiful young women are hired by tobacco companies to visit local pubs and fairs and market cigarettes with free, cool clothing, cigarette samples, and beer-drinking games. “Tobacco products are promoted as a means of attaining maturity, gaining confidence, and being sexually attractive and in control of one’s destiny,” states the recent WHO press release that launched the WHO report *Women and the Tobacco Epidemic: Challenges for the 21st Century*. Sponsoring beauty pageants and sporting, art, and music events is another strategy used to influence girls and young women to smoke. Peer pressure and the desire to be part of the “in-crowd” further the chances that a girl will light up.<sup>4</sup>

According to UNICEF, in the late 1990s, the ratio of girls who smoked almost doubled in seven CEE countries.<sup>5</sup> And in many European countries, there is an overall trend towards girls smoking slightly more than boys according to the *Tobacco Control Country Profiles* of the American Cancer Society. Because the prevalence of adult female smoking is largely determined by smoking patterns among teenage girls, it is possible that in the near future females will overtake males as the predominant smokers in many countries as they have in Sweden.<sup>6</sup>

### Freedom to Choose?

“Tobacco advertisements talk to us from our streets, films, radios, television sets, and sports events,” states Brundtland. “Everywhere our children . . . go there is someone or something telling

[them] to smoke.” GYTS results support this statement, finding that most youth reported having seen ads for cigarettes from a variety of media outlets including billboards, newspapers, magazines, and at public events. In the European locations tested, over one in five youth owned an object with a cigarette brand logo on it and many had also been offered free cigarettes by a tobacco company representative. “What makes this unacceptable and treacherous is that this dangerous and addictive product is sold to youth and adolescents as their assertion of their freedom to choose,” states Brundtland.

The tobacco industry constantly defends itself by arguing that one’s decision to smoke is a free and personal choice. In an ideal world, there might be some truth to this. But advertising and the media are explicitly used by the tobacco industry to heavily influence personal choice, sending messages that associate smoking with a positive lifestyle without including the negative impacts of smoking in their messages. Furthermore, children and adolescents are impressionable and are going through periods of personal development during which various activities are tried and tested. Unfortunately, given its addictive nature, smoking is less easily given up than a pierced ear, for example.

### Establishing Worldwide Bans and Promoting Education

In Albania, Sara Bogdani, an attractive 17-year-old, was hired by the Phillip Morris company to distribute free cigarettes in Tirana and other cities. Her salary for marketing the products was nearly three times higher than that of most Albanian doctors and she felt important and in the spotlight. One day when Sara was distributing cigarettes, an Albanian tobacco control representative—Albania’s national counterpart in tobacco control to WHO—approached her and explained the impact of what she was doing. Since that enlightening event, Sara has left her job, joined Albania’s Association for a Tobacco-free Albania, helped inaugurate a local tobacco-free school, and personally shared her experiences at the WHO *Conference on Youth and Smoking in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe* in Budapest last November.

During that conference, participating public health officials and experts agreed with WHO that countries should adopt a comprehensive mix of legislative, financial, preventive, cessation, and community-based tobacco control measures, including bans on tobacco product advertising, sponsorship, and public smoking, in addition to raising tobacco product prices and instituting programs to help smokers quit.

WHO is currently working worldwide with its Member States to negotiate the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which will act as a global complement to local and

national actions. The FCTC will be the world’s first multilaterally agreed-upon international treaty devoted to a major health issue. It will include a comprehensive set of regulations to govern the global rise and spread of tobacco products, addressing issues as diverse as tobacco advertising and promotion, agricultural diversification, smuggling, measures to protect youth, preventive media and educational strategies, and possibly a surveillance system for use among youth.

“A complete ban on advertising is the biggest step you can take,” says ASH’s Clive Bates. A study published in 2000 by the International Union Against Cancer assessed the impact that tobacco advertising bans have had on consumption in four countries—Norway, Finland, France, and New Zealand—where a ban was introduced as part of a comprehensive policy. In each country, adult per capita consumption of cigarettes fell between 15 and 34 percent after implementation of the ban and smoking prevalence among young people decreased.<sup>7</sup>

In November 1999, a total ban to be phased in was adopted on tobacco advertising in Poland. Currently, all billboard advertising has been eliminated and advertising in publications is facing complete elimination. “Poland’s success in tobacco control, especially during its difficult time of transition, represents a model for oth-

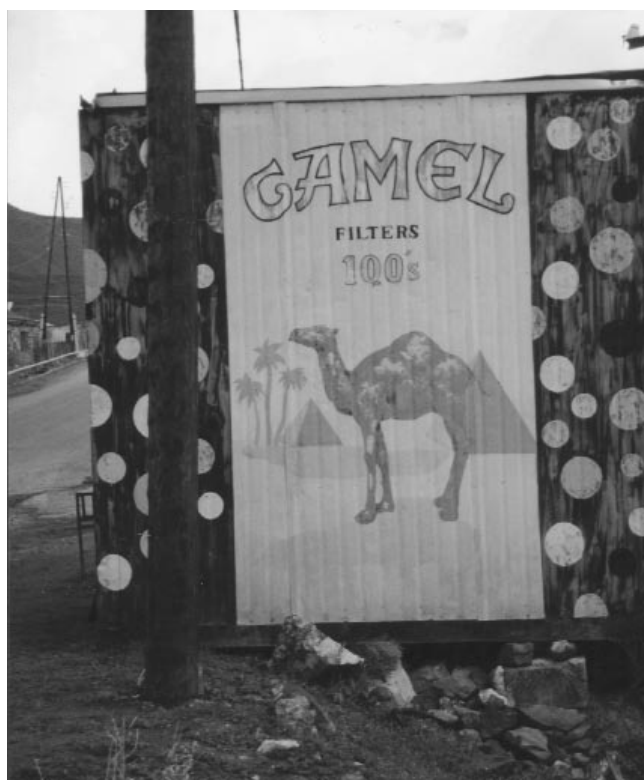


Photo: Suzanne E. Garman.

Eye-catching advertisements for cigarettes are found throughout the NIS and CEE, even in the most remote villages.



Photos: Suzanne E. Gilman

Lighting up is common among teenagers, including among girls, throughout the NIS and CEE.

er European nations to follow,” says Dr. Marc Danzon, director of WHO’s Regional Office for Europe. Having had one of the worst smoking prevalence rates in the world, Poland has watched smoking rates fall from 62 to 40 percent among men and 30 to 20 percent among women since 1982.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, smoking rates for Polish youth are still high, showing that while a country can have significant success overall with its efforts, youth are often the most difficult to reach because smoking is so much a part of rebellion and being cool. So while adult rates might fall quite significantly, youth rates may remain high, especially given the “new freedom” of youth in certain transitional countries.

Last December, the Hungarian Parliament introduced a total ban on direct and indirect tobacco advertising—starting with billboards and posters in 2002—but not without objections. “One side says very simply that tobacco advertising should be stopped because smoking is harmful to our health. On the other side, the advertising industry claims there is no direct link between advertising and the intensity of smoking,” reports Ágnes Sági, secretary general of the Hungarian chapter of the International Advertising Association to the *Budapest Sun*. “In the European advertising industry, the weight of opinion is in favor of self-regulation and freedom of commercial speech.”

In the past, some policy-makers encouraged by tobacco companies suggested placing bans only on ads targeted at youth. Bates notes, however, that “What appeals to 18-year-olds also appeals to 14-year-olds, so you can’t have separate bans for adults and youth.” The same goes for limiting the age of cigarette

buyers, which should be publicly justified because of health, not age. “If you say [cigarettes are] only for adults, kids will want them too because they want to be like adults. That’s why tobacco companies encourage these kinds of messages. [Furthermore, t]eenagers want to rebel so they will get the cigarettes somehow, anyway,” continues Bates.

In fact, tobacco companies have often knowingly sent such messages to stir up rebellion and make products more attractive to youth. For example, a 1986 letter from Camel about their new advertising campaign stated “[Camel advertising will create] the perception that Camel smokers are non-conformist, self-confident, and project a cool attitude, which is admired by their peers. . . . Aspiration to be perceived as a cool/a member of the in-group is one of the strongest influences affecting the behavior of younger adult smokers.”<sup>9</sup>

“Instead, teenagers should be encouraged and supported to rebel against the manipulative and exploitative acts of the tobacco industry,” says WHO Europe Communications and Advocacy Manager Franklin Apfel. “Public health advocates need to reframe the debate away from being labeled as health zealots and fascists to focus on the greed and early death-promoting behavior of the tobacco industry.”

As youth are very responsive to price, another solution is to raise taxes on tobacco products. “Tax increases are the single most effective measure [to decrease smoking] and many smokers support this,” says the World Bank’s Dr. Nicholas Burnett. Cigarette tax revenues are also a good source for fund-

ing national anti-tobacco strategies. Throughout the NIS/CEE, however, cigarette prices and taxes remain low. Some argue that higher taxes mean increased smuggling of tobacco products, but, as Albania and/or Bosnia and Herzegovina show, smuggling operations may be rampant even when low prices exist. A serious concern throughout the NIS/CEE region is enforcement. Even when there are laws related to smuggling, advertising bans, pricing, or limiting access, they are rarely enforced. The GYTS, for example, found that even if laws restricting sales to minors exist, young people are very rarely refused a sale if they are under age.

Bans on smoking in public places undoubtedly help youth now, however. This year's World No Tobacco Day focused on reducing second-hand smoke and featured numerous campaigns throughout Europe geared at enacting and enforcing such bans. These included a public street protest in the city of Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a ban on smoking in the city of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, and informal spot checks on restaurants across Norway. While these types of events are good for raising awareness, ongoing efforts are needed. For example, while the GYTS found that most youth want to stop smoking and that over two-thirds have tried, anti-smoking youth programs focus mostly on prevention and little on cessation. Even so, less than 50 percent of those surveyed had been taught in school about the dangers of smoking.<sup>10</sup>

As public awareness and tobacco control programs related to youth increase, some tobacco companies have adopted a public posture of opposition to teenage smoking and have even funded anti-smoking initiatives for teenagers, notes a new report by ASH and the London-based Cancer Research entitled *Danger—PR in the Playground: Tobacco Industry Initiatives on Youth Smoking*. The report finds, however, that the real purpose of these tobacco company efforts is to fend off meaningful legal restrictions on tobacco advertising and gain a public relations advantage. "It has nothing to do with reducing youth smoking," the report states. At the same time, these anti-smoking initiatives propose only measures that are unlikely to reduce youth smoking and indeed are more likely to make smoking more attractive by following historic trends and positioning cigarettes as an adult product and smoking as rebellious. They also resist or undermine measures geared towards youth that are known to work, such as taxation, proper advertising bans, high prices, and restrictions on smoking in public places. Because of this, WHO warns governments not to accept tobacco company assistance in tobacco control programs for youth.

Informing and educating youth is the key to lowering smoking rates. WHO believes that Member States who have ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* are legally bound to

ensure that children enjoy all of the rights guaranteed under the Convention, including protection from tobacco and passive smoke. It obliges Member States to ensure that children have access to information "aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health." Children should therefore be provided with information about tobacco and the tobacco industry and Member States should actively ensure that the media is encouraged to disseminate information that benefits children, and that children are protected from harmful disinformation.

"Until legislation provides for labelling of tobacco products and support for counter-advertising, children and adolescents are seeing and hearing only pro-tobacco messages in the media," concludes the GYTS. "Advertising against tobacco in Albania, compared with the advertising of cigarettes, is very small," says Phillip Morris's former teenage employee Sara Bogdani. "That is why we need your concrete support to assist us in this fight, in order that Albanian youth get a chance to receive the necessary information and learn what anti-tobacco advertising means."

Nobody wants to be an addict. Annette in Hungary and Sara in Albania began learning the truth about tobacco, which empowered them both to act now. It is continual education and a society committed to anti-smoking that will help them to continue to resist the seductive efforts of the tobacco industry in the future and perhaps to work against them. ■

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