

Discussion

Tobacco consumption and its health implications must be understood from the premise that tobacco smoke contains substances that are carcinogenic and has deleterious effects on the consumer as well as individuals exposed to environmental tobacco smoke. In addition, tobacco also contains nicotine that is highly addictive.

The survey has shown that just over one in three students had ever smoked cigarettes and that males are more likely to smoke than females. The relatively low prevalence of tobacco consumption among students in Saint Lucia does not mean that tobacco consumption is not a problem. As a matter of fact, when one considers that 13% of non-smokers are likely to smoke in the coming year, a caveat needs to be raised, as there is the potential for the problem to be exacerbated into a growing public health concern.

The early initiation of tobacco use among students, although moderately low must be of concern to education administrators, parents and health officials. The data revealed that before age ten, 29.2% of students were initiated to tobacco consumption. The factors facilitating this early initiation need to be explored. However, it is a common practice for smokers who are parents to engage their children in purchasing cigarettes for them. It must be noted, that there is an attraction to smoke even among students who are non-smokers. Protecting our youths from tobacco addiction must be a priority of policy makers in Saint Lucia. It is essential therefore, that consideration be given to the adoption of legislation prohibiting the sale of cigarettes to minors.

Access to purchasing cigarettes from a store is easy. Consideration needs to be given to the imposition of taxes and the prohibition of the sale of single cigarettes and packets to minors. Research has shown that price increases encourage some people to stop smoking; prevent others from starting and reduce the number of ex-smokers from resuming⁷. A tax imposition has another beneficial impact. Revenue derived from the taxes can be used to fund tobacco control and educational programmes⁸.

It would appear that smoking at home is prevalent particularly among female students. As to whether parents are aware that their children smoke is a matter of conjecture and needs to be explored further. However, parents should, or need to, monitor the activities of their children.

Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke in the home is higher among students who smoke than non-smokers. However, in the home, both groups are exposed, although smokers are more likely than non-smokers. Students, parents, as well as the general public, need to be educated on the harmful effect of environmental tobacco smoke.

ETS exposure outside the home is high for students and there is a strong perception that smoking should be banned from public places as it has a harmful effect on others. The United Kingdom Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health (1998) concluded that exposure to environmental tobacco smoke is a cause of lung cancer, and in those with long term exposure, the increased risk is in the order of 20-30%⁹.

The desire to stop smoking is significantly high among current smokers and small attempts have been made by students to stop. The prevalence of smoking in school and at home is not known and this poses a challenge both to school administrators and parents. The data however, should alert persons to the fact that students are engaged in smoking tobacco and some would like to quit. Supportive systems should be in place in order to facilitate those students who are desirous of stopping.

Although the study showed a significant amount of the students exposed to anti-smoking messages in the media, one should be careful in drawing conclusions that this is the norm. This high percentage (81.5%) may be due to the heightened awareness created by the Ministry of Health and Cancer Society in observance of World No Tobacco Day, 31st May, 2001. The study was undertaken during the months of May and June 2001.

Pro-tobacco messages in the media and tobacco paraphernalia can impact negatively on normative minds. Research has shown that partial ban has little effect. A World Bank report has indicated that comprehensive bans on cigarette advertising and promotion can reduce smoking¹⁰. It is essential that some form of legislation be promulgated to ban tobacco advertising in the media and the offering of tobacco objects to minors.

Education of students on the dangers of smoking needs to be intensified. The proposed Health and Family Life Education policy, which is being drafted, should consider, inter alia, tobacco education.