

as high as those who currently smoke. Although this appears to be an ominous sign it is countered by the views of 97% of never smokers who say that they will probably not smoke if offered a cigarette by a friend and by the views of 98.9% who do not see themselves smoking in the next five years. This intention appears to be reinforced by the fact that one-third of never smokers think that it is difficult to stop smoking once it is started; indicating their belief that cigarette smoking is addictive.

With regard to cessation, most current smokers appear to want to quit smoking. Approximately seven in every ten expressed a desire to stop while over three-quarter tried to stop smoking in the year preceding the survey. Of those students who have quit smoking in the past, approximately six in every ten did so to improve their health. It is somewhat

contradictory that this is happening although lessons on the dangers of cigarette smoking do not appear to be frequently taught in schools. Indeed, fewer than 50% of students recalled having been taught the dangers of smoking during the particular school year while only 15.7% recalled having discussed smoking and health as part of a lesson during that term.

Given this dearth in information at the school level and the fact that more than 60% of current smokers said that they had not received help or advice to stop smoking, it could be said that teenage smokers between the age group 13 – 15 years are not receiving sufficient assistance to help them fulfil their desire to stop smoking in their early years.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Problems related to smoking among school-based children between the ages 13-15 appear to be generally worst in Trinidad and Tobago than they are in the other Caribbean countries surveyed. The fact that in Trinidad and Tobago close to half (40%) of all students within this age group have experimented with cigarette smoking at one time or the other is sufficient to send wake up signals that this is a situation which warrants attention. Of greater concern should be the fact that children within this age group are smoking more than their elders 14-18 years did in 1988⁷ and that an almost equal percentage of male and females are experimenting with smoking before the age of 10 years.

It is apparent that extensive mass media advertising of cigarettes as well as easy and seemingly non-existent barriers to cigarette access by teenagers are directly fuelling the habit among this age group in spite of the fact that there are laws prohibiting the sale of cigarettes to minors.

Another major factor influencing the increase in smoking among teenagers 13-15 years is that many of them, especially current smokers, live in households where parents and other adults smoke. This appears to be a ready way for replicating the legacy of smoking. It is not surprising to have found that students do more smoking at home than at school.

Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke appears to be a sour point with students since almost all the respondents felt that smoking should be banned in public places.

Any attempts, therefore, to curb the increasing use of tobacco, especially

cigarette smoking among teenagers must include the following:

1. Effective enforcement of the existing laws prohibiting sale of cigarettes to minors;
2. Enactment of legislation to make it an offence for adults to use minors to purchase cigarettes and other tobacco products;
3. Continuous information campaigns at the community level to make traders, parents and other adults aware of the laws prohibiting sale of cigarette to minors;
4. Continuous information campaigns aimed at households to alert and/or reinforce the message that environmental tobacco smoke is dangerous to health;
5. Greater use of anti-tobacco advertising which places special emphasis on stemming the increase in female smoking as well as dissuading children 18 years and under from ever wanting to experiment with tobacco use;
6. Compulsory inclusion of age-appropriate information about tobacco addiction and its effects on health as part of the curricula in primary and secondary schools;
7. A total ban on cigarettes advertising since it has been found in other parts of the world that partial bans are not usually successful because advertisers use other devious measures to circumvent the law and still get their messages out;
8. Restrictions on promotions and sponsorship of tobacco products;
9. Restrictions on smoking in public places;
10. Increased taxation on tobacco products so as to make them less affordable to children and adolescents.
11. Implementation of cessation programmes that will encourage

children and adolescents who smoke to quit the habit.

Recognizing the complexity of the strategy that has to be employed to deter and control the life threatening practice of cigarette smoking, a Working Paper by the Trinidad and Tobago Law Commission in August of 2000 states that:

“In order to achieve downward trends in tobacco consumption, tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship bans should form but one part of an overall tobacco control strategy which should include measures such as public education and counter-marketing campaigns; effective enforcement of bans on the sale of cigarettes to underage smokers; smoke-free public places and workplaces; and appropriate financial measures.”.

The Paper therefore recommends the prohibition of all forms of direct and indirect advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products and the sale of tobacco products to persons 18 years and under as well as restricts the use of cigarette vending machines and smoking in certain public places.

It also recommends that there be tremendous increases in the Ministry of Health funding of tobacco control measures to include large-scale education and cessation programmes. Recommendations are also made in this Paper for including tobacco education in the curriculum at the primary, secondary and tertiary education levels and these should go a long way in

lifting the awareness of the population to the dangers of tobacco use.

These noble ideals, however, will not be easily implemented given the might of the pro-tobacco lobby and the claim by smokers of their right to follow the lifestyle choice of their own. If tobacco use is to be reduced to 20% by 2004 (baseline 1995) as advocated by the Ministry of Health in the publication *Spotlight on Health*⁸, political commitment will be vital in bringing these ideals into reality.

It is important, therefore, that at the levels of the Ministry of Health and the community, advocacy to have these measures implemented must be intensified in the years ahead.

Follow up

The survey should be repeated every three years to allow for continuous monitoring of the tobacco use situation among teenagers. In addition a school-based survey should be conducted among teachers and other staff who work in schools to determine the extent to which cigarettes and other tobacco products are being used among this group.

A separate school-based survey using a much larger sample should be conducted also in Tobago. This should provide much more useful data for which comparisons can be made of the differences in tobacco use among teenagers 13-15 in the two islands. The GYTS sample size used did not allow for an effective comparison to be undertaken in Tobago.

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