



DISCUSSION

The survey solicited the views of 2661 students 96% of whom fell between the

ages 13-15 years old throughout Trinidad and Tobago concerning their perceptions on and use of tobacco products. The questionnaire included a question on alcohol use but the responses to this were not included in the analysis, which sought to concentrate primarily on responses directly related to tobacco use. Responses from students in Form V were ignored because they were fewer than 35 in each instance and were considered to be too few to be meaningful to the Study.

Ever smokers (students who would have smoked cigarettes at least once in their lives) constituted 40% of the sample. This is 5.2% higher than the level of usage that was found in the 1988 school-based study for students 14-18 years of age conducted by Singh H., Maharaj HD, and Shipp M.⁷

Male students were more inclined to have ever smoked cigarettes than were female students. This reflects a pattern of smoking consistent with previous studies on smoking undertaken locally^{6, 7, 8}. The urge to experiment increased progressively as students moved from Form I through to Form IV and as they advanced in age. Indeed, the percentage of smoking among students 16 years and older was found to be higher than it was among students in the categories 14 years and younger.

This progressive pattern in the use of cigarettes by ever smokers was also similar among current smokers (i.e. students who would have smoked cigarettes on one or more occasions within the 30 days preceding the survey). The usage level of cigarette smoking among current smokers was 14%, which was higher than the 10.5% found among older students 14-18 years who were classified as current smokers in the 1988 Study⁷. It was also marginally higher than the 13.4% found among the age group 15-24 years in the Health Needs Assessment Study⁸ conducted in 1995. Percentage of female current smokers (9.5%)

was higher than the national percentage of 5.1%, which was found in the health Needs Assessment Survey and it reflects the international trend of increased female smoking, especially among young women¹¹.

The progressive pattern of cigarette usage was also evident among frequent smokers (students who smoked 20 or more cigarettes within the 30 days preceding the survey). This pattern was also almost similar among current smokers who use tobacco products other than cigarettes, as well as, those who use any tobacco products including cigarettes.

Of concern is that the percentage in use among current smokers of any tobacco product is greater than those who smoke cigarettes only. This may be an indication that students may be willing to use alternative tobacco products on occasions they are unable to access cigarettes. Male current smokers are more likely to smoke and to use any tobacco product than female current smokers. The percentage of smoking among frequent cigarette smokers is quite low when compared to current smokers and ever smokers.

It was found that the usage of tobacco by students at the Post Primary level was unusually high. Post primary students represent that segment of students who would not have passed the qualifying examination for automatic promotion from primary school to secondary school. Approximately 73% of this segment fell within the age group 12 – 14 years. Yet, the percentage of post primary current smokers was greater than that of students in the 15-year old age group. It was greater than it was among students in Forms 1 to 4 also. The percentage of frequent smokers as well as current smokers of cigarettes

and users of any and other tobacco products in the Post Primary classes was greater than it was among students in Forms 1 – 4. Moreover, it was found that students in the Post Primary classes were more susceptible to initiating smoking than students in all the other classes.

The percentage of frequent smokers and users of tobacco products other than cigarettes in the age group twelve years and younger, was greater than it was in the age group 13 – 15 years. This suggests a pattern of more chronic smoking and tobacco use among younger, mostly male, students.

With respect to the age of initiation, almost one-fifth of the students smoked cigarette before the age of 10 years with males and females having done so in equal proportions. This is of concern as it points to the potential for a major increase in smoking among females. The concern assumes greater importance when it is considered that more pro-tobacco messages are seen by female students than male students and that more female students (40%) owned objects with cigarette brand logos on them than male students (23.4%).

Of greater concern is that the percentage among students who first smoked cigarettes before age 10 has doubled in approximately 4 years from 15.6% among students 16 years and older to 32.2% among those 12 years and younger. Indeed, unlike the progressive trend that has been observed wherein smoking among students increased with age and class promotion, the reverse was seen wherein the percentage among students who initiate smoking before age 10 generally tended to increase at the lower class levels and the lower age groups.

The data suggest that the age of initiation for smoking has decreased since the 1988 survey⁷, which showed that most of the

students surveyed had their first puff of cigarettes between the ages 14 and 16 years of age. In the GYTS, it was found that most students first used cigarettes between the ages 12-13 years.

Encouragingly, the good news is that the perception held by students of their peers who smoke is not very favourable. 91.8% of students thought girls who smoke did not 'cut it' as being cool while 82.2% thought the same of boys. Boys who smoke, however, do seem to have some appeal since at least 1 in every 3 students felt such boys have more friends. Current smokers were more of this view than never smokers. Of concern, however, is that a greater percentage of female current smokers than male current smokers think boys as well as girls who smoke have more friends.

The results also validated the findings of Biglan A, Duncan TE, Ary DV, et al in their survey¹² which found that students with parents and significant others who smoke are more likely to become smokers themselves. In this regard, it was found that compared to never smokers a greater percentage of current smokers had parents who smoke. In addition, it was seen that a higher percentage of female current smokers compared to male current smokers live in households where parents and other adults smoke. It is, therefore, not surprising to have found that twice as many female current smokers are able to smoke at home as compared to smoking at school where male smoking is more prevalent. In terms of both genders, it was found that more smoking is done at home than at school.

Other influences such as peer group appeal appear to play an important part in promoting and/or reinforcing the habit of

cigarette smoking¹². Among current smokers almost all (both male and female), had high percentages of close friends who smoke and this may be playing an important part in their continuing to smoke. On the other hand, never smokers had fewer close friends who smoke. Responding to the question whether they would probably smoke if offered a cigarette by a friend, 97% of never smokers said that they would not.

Smoking by actors in movies, on TV and on videos is pervasive and perhaps presents a major influence in propagating the habit of smoking among students¹³. Overall, approximately 96% of them had seen actors smoking within 30 days of the survey with almost two-thirds of them having seen a lot of images of actors smoking during the same period. Jennifer J. Tickle in her study *Favourite movie stars, their tobacco use in Contemporary movies, and its association with adolescent smoking* concluded that adolescents who choose movie stars who use tobacco onscreen are significantly more likely to have advanced smoking states and more favourable attitude towards smoking than adolescents who choose non-smoking stars¹³.

Advertising is also very pervasive. Eight in every ten students surveyed had seen pro-tobacco messages in newspapers and magazines while nine in every ten had seen cigarette brand names on TV while watching sports and other programmes within 30 days of the survey. This indicates that both the print and electronic media are having equal impact on spreading the message of smoking to children. Compared to advertising, direct promotions appear to be having less impact or may be a lesser-used strategy to sell cigarettes since only one in every five students had an object with a cigarette logo on it and one in every ten current smoker was offered a free cigarette by a tobacco representative.

The main avenue through which current smokers obtain cigarettes is by purchasing them at shops or from street vendors. Although legislation exists prohibiting sales of cigarettes to minors, almost three-quarter of current smokers were able to buy cigarettes and were not refused because of their age. This occurred more among female current smokers than male current smokers. The actions of vendors indicate that they may not be aware of the law or, if they are, they flout the law because they know that it is not being monitored for compliance.

With respect to environmental tobacco smoke, students appear to have a relatively high level of awareness regarding the connection between smoking and ill health. Seven in every ten were of the view that smoke from others is definitely harmful to their health. Never smokers seem more aware of this than current smokers although the latter was more highly exposed than the former to smoke from others in their homes and public places.

Eight in every ten current smoker had been exposed to smoke from others in public places within seven days of the survey. Generally, it was seen that students were more exposed to environmental tobacco smoke in public places than in their homes.

This points to a very loose and unrestricted use of tobacco in public places and an apparent lack of appreciation or knowledge among smokers of the health risks of environmental tobacco smoke to others. Accordingly, eight in every 10 student indicated that smoking in public places should be banned.

The percentage of students surveyed who are susceptible to smoking (12%) is almost

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