

## **The International Tobacco Regulators' Conference: The Beginning of a Long-Term Collaboration to Combat the Public Health Impact of Tobacco Use**

### **Background**

Tobacco use continues to be the leading preventable cause of death world-wide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), tobacco kills nearly six million people every year—including 600,000 non-smokers exposed to second hand smoke.<sup>1</sup> Individual nations' regulation of tobacco products targeted to combat this tremendous world-wide public health impact continues to expand and evolve. While many countries, especially in recent years, have made great strides to regulate tobacco products' manufacturing, distribution, sale, and advertising to benefit the public health, other countries have asserted little or no public health oversight over tobacco products' content and sale in their market place. What is clear is that many nations are moving swiftly toward regulating these products that are predicted to kill one billion people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> However, to date, there has been only limited coordination of these regulatory efforts.

Regulation of tobacco products challenges the existing structure of government regulatory authorities, requiring governments to adapt their historical regulatory practices to oversee products that, unlike food, drugs, and other consumer products, cause significant negative public health and economic consequences when used as intended. Tobacco regulation is also increasingly a cross-border issue. Governments face similar challenges in educating their populations, testing products, and reacting to evolving industry marketing practices. The global nature of manufacturing and distribution creates challenges within international supply chains, including internet sales and illicit trade.

These issues are best tackled when government officials can share information and work together to address issues of mutual importance and benefit. This requires collaboration and open dialogue where best practices can be shared and strategies for facing new challenges can be jointly developed. Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC),<sup>3</sup> for example, have already made great progress in working together and developing guidelines on tobacco regulation.

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<sup>1</sup> See World Health Organization Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2011, available at [http://www.who.int/tobacco/global\\_report/2011/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/tobacco/global_report/2011/en/index.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.who.int/fctc/en/>

## **The International Tobacco Regulators' Conference**

Against this backdrop, the *International Tobacco Regulators' Conference* was held in Leesburg, Virginia on November 14-16, 2011. This conference was co-hosted by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative (TFI), and brought together 65 government officials from 22 countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, European Union, Republic of Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay. While many other countries around the world are currently pursuing public health regulation of tobacco products, this initial meeting gathered leading countries in tobacco product regulation, as well as some of the key participants in ongoing WHO FCTC and WHO initiatives linked to tobacco-related regulatory actions. It also included a number of countries that had indicated interest in initiating public health tobacco regulation.

The conference included 11 different panel discussions on the following topics: Current Approaches and Challenges to Tobacco Regulation; Science-based Regulation; Research, Surveillance and Intervention Evaluation; Non-Cigarette Tobacco Products; Illicit Trade; Health Warnings; Advertising and Promotion; Ingredients and Constituents; Education and Outreach; Financing Tobacco Product Regulation; and Next Steps. In addition, all participating countries were given the opportunity to describe the status of their current tobacco regulation efforts. While programs vary from country to country, most participating countries are working diligently to implement the recommendations of the WHO FCTC in a way that complements their own national agendas. Specific examples of progress include the requirement for plain packaging, premarket review of new products, significant tax increases, review of modified risk products, pictorial health warnings, fire-safe cigarettes, advertising and sponsorship restrictions, ingredient disclosure requirements, and restrictions on use of certain flavors.

Participants also discussed some of the tobacco industry's responses to individual nations' tobacco product regulations, which have been varied and largely targeted to weaken or challenge countries' public health regulatory actions locally or by invoking international trade agreements.

The participants shared best practices across the spectrum of regulatory actions. They discussed various unresolved issues, such as the question of how to provide steady funding for tobacco regulation. Participants agreed that, given the increased legal challenges brought by the tobacco industry, collaboration on preventing and responding to these challenges could be very useful. They also discussed the importance of evaluating the public health and economic impact of tobacco product regulations. All participants were actively engaged and made significant contributions.

## **Moving Forward On International Tobacco Regulation**

In order to capitalize on the momentum from the conference, the WHO has established an informal network of tobacco regulators from around the globe. The goal of the network is to



continue to share information and collaborate on issues of common interest. The network aims to complement the work being carried out under the WHO FCTC, where parties have developed partial guidelines for Articles 9 and 10 of the treaty, which address regulation of the contents of tobacco products and regulation of tobacco product disclosures, respectively. WHO plans to expand this informal network through the addition of countries that did not participate in the regulators' conference. The network is intended to complement the work of the WHO's Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation (TobReg) and Tobacco Laboratory Network (TobLabNet).

The conference participants also pledged to work toward increased sharing of information including research, product testing, illicit trade, international trade, and other issues. They also committed to expand sharing of best practices on graphic warning images and information technology (*i.e.*, technology for tracking and tracing, or monitoring retailer compliance) between countries.

## **Conclusion**

As countries around the world continue to tackle the worsening global public health impact caused by tobacco use, they are expanding existing frameworks and developing new regulatory authorities. Cooperation and collaboration among national governments is essential for effective progress globally. Successful strategies by individual governments can be shared with others, and cross-border issues that require international collaboration can be addressed in a thoughtful and inclusive manner. The network resulting from the International Tobacco Regulators' Conference will continue the dialogue in the global regulatory community to achieve these public health goals.