

Greece giving up on tobacco control

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Greece has never excelled in tobacco control, especially protecting non-smokers from exposure to secondhand smoke (SHS). Inconsistent enforcement of the smoke-free legislation during the recent economic and political crisis (1) has undermined the effectiveness of smoking bans in public places. This has resulted not only in the highest prevalence of smoking among European Union (EU) countries(2), but also in a large proportion of the Greek population being regularly exposed to SHS. In 2014, Greece had the highest proportion of people aged ≥ 15 years who were exposed to SHS in drinking (83%) or eating (72%) establishments (EU average 25% and 12% respectively), and the lowest proportion of people working in smoke-free workplaces (41% vs. EU average 73%) (2). It is estimated that 670 people die each year due to exposure to SHS (3), while smoking related mortality has not followed the declining trends in the rest of the EU countries (4). For example, within the past fifteen years, standardised mortality from diseases of the respiratory system increased by 26.6% and from trachea, bronchus and lung cancer by 0.5% in Greece. On the contrary, in the 28 member states of the European Union it decreased by 25.8% and 12.6% respectively (5).

In 2014, the total amount of fines for infringement of smoking-related laws and for selling tobacco and alcohol to minors was €353,240 while €464.790 was collected in annual licencing fees for areas where smoking is permitted in enclosed spaces (6). According to existing legislation the fee is €200 per m^2 . Considering that, only 2,324 m^2 of space were properly licensed in 2014 in the entire country, even though smoking in hospitality venues seems to be the norm (2). To make matters worse, no money was collected in 2015 for these budget codes (code 3737 for fines and code 1253 for licencing fees) and the amount of income predicted in 2016 is zero for both budget codes (6).

Smoke free legislation and increased tobacco taxation have been effective in reducing smoking prevalence, mortality and healthcare costs in many European countries (7), but they have not been a priority for any of the recent governments in Greece (1). With the country still

in recession and in dire need of money, the 2016 budget serves as a cynical confession that the current Greek government has no intention to protect non-smokers from exposure to SHS, prevent minors from buying tobacco or even impose fines to offenders. The public health community both within Greece and at the EU level needs to increase pressure to the Greek coalition government and reverse this decision. Strongly enforced smoking bans in all enclosed public spaces will save hundreds of lives each year, produce savings in hospital costs, generate additional income from fines and finally bring Greece in line with most EU countries which are in the forefront of tobacco control. The time to act is now.

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