

Tackling tobacco smoking in Saudi Arabia

Raising taxes on tobacco is the measure with the “least compliance”¹ worldwide among the set of measures introduced by the WHO to facilitate implementation of its Framework Convention on Tobacco Control programme.¹ In an extended cost-effectiveness analysis, Stéphane Verguet and colleagues (April, 2015)² interpret that an increase in tobacco taxes can be a pro-poor policy instrument in China, where nearly a third of the world’s smokers live.¹ The linked Comment by Rong Zheng and Jidong Huang³ emphasises that tobacco tax increases are not necessarily regressive. Being influenced by the Chinese State Tobacco Monopoly Administration’s concern that a tobacco tax increase would lead to an unfair burden on the poor, the Chinese Government has refrained from increasing taxes on low-end cigarettes.³ On the other hand, Saudi Arabia’s refusal in recent times to increase taxes on the import of cigarettes is due to the Finance Ministry’s apprehension that increased tobacco taxation would encourage smuggling of cigarettes. Nevertheless, the Health Ministry in Saudi Arabia has taken various initiatives to reduce smoking in the country. The anti-smoking mobile clinic of the Tobacco Control Programme is one such initiative that has helped more than 2000 smokers, both male and female, quit smoking.⁴ The 10 anti-smoking mobile clinics are in addition to more than 40 anti-smoking centres throughout the country.⁴ More such mobile clinics and centres should be established in every nook and corner of Saudi Arabia to cater to the growing smoking population in the country, where an increasing number of women and adolescents are starting smoking.

Tobacco smoking is certainly a substantial public health problem in Saudi Arabia today. In the past,

an increase in the price of cigarettes has not deterred the affluent Saudi population from smoking. More needs to be done by the Government in educating the masses about the ill-effects of this practice and reinforcing non-smoking attitudes, rather than focusing merely on increasing the price of cigarettes.

We declare no competing interests.

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- 1 Mullan Z. Death and taxes. *Lancet Glob Health* 2015; **3**: e178.
- 2 Verguet S, Gauvreau CL, Mishra S, et al. The consequences of tobacco tax on household health and finances in rich and poor smokers in China: an extended cost-effectiveness analysis. *Lancet Glob Health* 2015; **3**: e206–16.
- 3 Zheng R, Huang J. Would raising tobacco tax in China unfairly burden the poor? *Lancet Glob Health* 2015; **3**: e181–82.
- 4 Ministry program helps over 2000 to quit smoking. <http://www.arabnews.com/food-health/news/722006> (accessed March 26, 2015).

