
Editöre Mektup

Letter

Rights of the children against tobacco (protect them before they are misled, educate them before they take up the habit)

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 4 million people die prematurely due to tobacco related illness each year and these deaths estimated to rise 10 million annually by the year 2030. By the year of 2020, 70 percent of all deaths from tobacco will occur in developing countries (1). Because tobacco consumption is only falling in the developed world, from about 2700 to 2600 since 1970, over same the period it has risen from about 800 to 1400 in developing countries (2). Many of the victims are today's children. If current trends continue 250 million children alive today will be killed by tobacco (3). By using World Bank data on the number of children and adolescents, male and female, who reached age 20 in 1995, for each World Bank region, and another data from the WHO on the prevalence of smokers in all age groups up to the age of 30 in each of these regions, the number of children and young who will begin smoking was estimated (2). It was calculated that the number of children and young people taking up smoking ranges from 14.000 to 15.000 per day in the high-income countries as a whole. For middle- and low-income countries, the estimated num-

bers range from 68.000 to 84.000. This means that every day, there are between 82.000 and 99.000 young people starting to smoke and risking rapid addiction to nicotine worldwide, mostly in developing countries.

Tobacco companies spends huge budgets a year advertising their products worldwide, using intentionally misleading messages that are critical in shaping children's attitudes towards tobacco use. By using both direct and indirect advertising, the tobacco industry associates tobacco consumption with powerful and attractive images. Targeted at children these promotions encourage children to take up behavior harmful to their physical, mental and social development. To replace the thousands of consumers who either stop smoking or die each day, the tobacco industry aims continually recruit new smokers. By closely studying the habits and social attitudes of children, the industry has been able to create extremely effecting marketing campaigns aimed at them.

Tobacco companies directly advertise their products in some countries. But today since many countries impose total or partial bans on tobac-

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co advertising, tobacco industry finds other ways of indirect advertising such as sponsoring sporting events (Formula 1), rock concerts, art competitions, discos, placing their brands and logos on t-shirts, a lot of other merchandise and toys popular with children such as a puzzle and decorating Formula-1 paintings of children's playgrounds in a shopping mall which was also belonged to a share holder of transnational tobacco company.

The message targeted at children, encourages them to take up a harmful behavior and physical development and also misleads them. By associating smoking with a game, sport or a happy and healthy life style and by not showing the dangers related with smoking, tobacco advertising is inherently misleading. Power and impact of these deceptive messages should not be underestimated. It has been shown that advertising is more likely to influence teenagers to smoke than even peer pressure (4). Tobacco promotional activities are casually related to the onset of smoking in adolescents and the exposure to cigarette advertising is predictive of smoking among adolescents (5,6). The prevalence of use of new brands and even prevalence of smoking altogether increases following the introduction of brand advertisement that appeals to young people.

Tobacco use generally begins during adolescence and continues through adulthood, sustained by addiction to the nicotine in tobacco. The most people who became addicted to tobacco begin using it between 10 and 20 years of age, before they have to access information or opportunities to develop the skills that would help them to resist temptations to use tobacco. Children and young's should be provided with information about the immediate and long-term health effects of tobacco use, the addictiveness of the product, the way the tobacco industry targets young people and the manner in which tobacco advertising is misleading.

The scientifically proved evidence of the harm tobacco causes and the continuing efforts of tobacco companies to draw young people in a lifelong addiction need comprehensive multi-le-

vel strategies, including strong public policies. So states and governments should protect children from harmful misinformation through comprehensive restrictions on tobacco advertising.

For many years it was believed that health education would be enough to make smokers to stop. Although smokers learnt that how dangerous smoking is, they could not give up, because nicotine addiction is so powerful. Usage of tobacco fits the definition of addiction, including continued use in spite of harmful consequences and repeated attempts to stop smoking. It is important to educate children and young people before they take up the habit.

Primary and secondary school teachers' attitudes and guidance might be effective on their students to prevent smoking. Unfortunately most of developing countries teachers are also smoker and some of them even smoke whilst they are with their students. In 1996, tobacco advertising and smoking in public places were banned by law in Turkey that the country nearly half of the adult population was smoker. In Bursa, one of the biggest cities of Turkey, we conducted two different surveys to analyze smoking habits and attitudes of secondary school teachers, first one in 1995 before law became effective and second one in 2001, five years after authorization of the law (7,8). We found that there was not any real decrease in smoking prevalence of teachers who educate the young generation of the country, five years after the law. The smoking prevalence of teachers was 43 percent in 1996, whilst 41 percent of them regular and 32 percent of them irregular smoker in 2001. Another interesting finding of second survey was that the teachers believed 38 percent of their students smoked cigarette regularly or irregularly. So half of the teachers who would protect children and adolescent taking up smoking habit were smoker. The one solution of this problem might be educating teachers about the immediate and long-term health hazards of tobacco use, the addictiveness of the product, misleading advertising of tobacco industry targeting young people. Another solution might be educating students out of school premises with lecturers given by professionals, such as tobacco prevention specialist. There is a

sample of this kind of education in Bursa, Turkey. City voluntaries established a youth camp out of the city center two years ago. This camp accept youngs between 13-15 years of age for two weeks during their summer holidays. During this period youngs join outdoor activities such as sports, folkloric dances and socialize with the others. One of the objects establishing these youth camp is educate adolescents about problems waiting them whilst they are growing up, such as taking up tobacco habit. Last summer education in the camp against tobacco has been given by two medical professionals who were both attended a special course called "Tobacco Control Specialized Training Course" that was done by Turkish Thoracic Society, in May 2003. But I should remind you the fact that whilst we are educating 13-15 years of age adolescents of Bursa in the youth camp, children of same city playing in a ground that was painted with Formula-1 pictures on its walls in a shopping mall and at the same time a puzzle of car races indirectly advertising tobacco is attracting the children in a market inside of same mall. So, we believe that as well as government and states, civil public groups, medical associations and scientific communities should take a part on prevention rights of new generations against tobacco and governments should protect children from harmful misinformation through comprehensive restrictions on tobacco advertising. Without such policies, the rights of children will continue to be violated.

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