



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The guidelines on implementation of article 11 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) state that "... every person should be informed of the health consequences, addictive nature and mortal threat posed by tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke. Globally, many people are not fully aware of, misunderstand or underestimate the risks for morbidity and premature mortality due to tobacco use and exposure to tobacco smoke. Well-designed health warnings and messages on tobacco product packages have been shown to be a cost-effective means to increase public awareness of the health effects of tobacco use and to be effective in reducing tobacco consumption. Effective health warnings and messages and other tobacco product packaging and labelling measures are key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach to tobacco control".

This is exactly the focus of the World No Tobacco Day (WNTD) 2009 and it gives me great pleasure to state that the Eastern Mediterranean Region is moving ahead in tobacco control. The movement that we have witnessed in the past two years has been unprecedented. This year's World No Tobacco Day will continue to press forward the momentum.

World No Tobacco Day this year calls for strong pictorial health warnings to be adopted for all tobacco products. The Eastern Mediterranean Region has already begun taking this message forward. The first country in the Region to adopt pictorial health warnings was Jordan, and the first to adopt pictorial health warnings occupying 50% of the pack size was Egypt, followed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Djibouti and, most recently, the member

states of the Gulf Cooperation Council which are now in the process of selecting their pictorial health warnings. These actions represent success for the FCTC, for the guidelines on implementation of article 11 and for the (MPOWER) policies adopted by WHO in order to reduce the demand that fuels the tobacco epidemic.

It is worth noting that the countries that have taken major steps in this regard are all parties to the FCTC and are regular contributors to advancing tobacco control in the Region. Today I salute them. Today the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean Region calls upon all countries of the Region to follow in their footsteps and to push forward with stronger tobacco control measures that will save millions of lives in the Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Experience in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Thailand and other countries proves that strong health warnings on tobacco packages, particularly pictorial warnings, are an important information source for younger smokers and also for people in countries with low literacy rates.

This intervention can be implemented at virtually no cost to the government. The content and graphic presentation of pack warning labels should be legislatively mandated and visible. The warning label should be permanent and not removable, in a national language (that is, a language that is understood at national level), in the top half of the pack, clear and cover at least half of the total pack size. It should describe specific health effects and diseases caused by tobacco use. Different warning labels should be alternated in order not to lose the public's attention.

For the pictorial warnings to be as effective as intended, I call upon all decision-makers to follow the guidelines of article 11 of the FCTC and to ban the use of those linguistic terms that can mislead the public and that can suggest that a particular tobacco product is less harmful than other products. These are terms such as "low tar", "light", "ultra-light" or "mild". No tobacco products are safe, and the use of these terms suggests, incorrectly, that some products are less harmful.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I draw your attention to one important recommendation in particular for applying pictorial health warnings. Warnings should be applied to all tobacco packs, to all products and at all points of sale. No tobacco product should be exempt and claims such as “the nature of the product is different” or “this is not a regular tobacco pack” should not be heeded. Pictorial health warnings should target all tobacco products without exception. The style might be different for each pack but the concept and principle should not be compromised for any reason.

Let me remind you that the industry will not stop its attempts to manipulate the regulations for its own benefit. Thus we have to anticipate its steps and act accordingly. In the past there was no need for pack design specifications, but now to overcome the effects of pictorial health warnings on packs, producers are redesigning their packs. We are now seeing square packs and packs with four fronts, and no doubt there will be more to come. It is strongly recommended that one product specification be adopted to minimize the possibility of manipulation.

Finally, I emphasize the importance of comprehensiveness in tobacco control. One measure will not work alone. All measures should be implemented together to achieve real reduction in demand and in prevalence of tobacco use. The FCTC provides us with this comprehensive approach. Strong implementation of the FCTC means strong tobacco control at national level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I take the opportunity of this occasion to celebrate the success of the Member States of the Region so far, and to confirm our commitment to our partners to work hand in hand with them at all national levels to achieve better tobacco control policies, for stronger implementation and for full compliance with the Framework Convention Tobacco Control.