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Conference Report

Fiddling while tobacco burns: sixth world conference on smoking and health, Tokyo, 9-12 November 1987

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Every four years since 1968 sections of the world's community interested in the control of smoking have gathered for a world conference. This year it was the turn of Japan to be the host country. Previous host countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Canada) all had important strategies and tactics for controlling smoking or important reports to tell the world. The Swedish and Canadian conferences in particular saw plenary speakers throw gauntlet after gauntlet down to the tobacco industry, calling for political action and using terms like "war" and "enemy."

Japan was quite a different story. With a staggering two thirds of Japanese men smoking, a government with a monopoly on tobacco and a growing enthusiasm for export to the vast markets of South East Asia, and the recent start of vigorous marketing targeted at Japanese women, who have a low prevalence of smoking, it seemed clear that the local organising committee was looking to the conference as a means of strengthening the hitherto shaky hand of its domestic health agencies.

Rapidly rising lung cancer in Japan

The future will be the judge of the wisdom of that intention, and the outstanding opening plenary lecture by Japan's Professor Takeshi Hirayama augured well. Professor Hirayama spoke on the effects of smoking on health with information drawn from a massive Japanese data bank (the second largest study ever on the subject). For years the international tobacco industry has publicly gloated over the apparent anomaly in the high prevalence of smoking in men in Japan and the comparatively low prevalence of lung cancer. In a health educator's nightmare of slides crammed with graphs Professor Hirayama showed that, as with most matters of science, the tobacco industry is now drastically ill informed on that score. The recent incidence of lung cancer in Japanese men is accelerating at a faster rate than that in any other country for which data are available.

Asked from the floor to explain this increase, Professor Hirayama speculated about the cohort lag effect arising from the large increase

in smoking during and after the Korean war and the possible role of the vast number of additives increasingly being used by the industry in efforts to modify tar and nicotine yields, combustion temperature, and flavour. Professor Hirayama was the first to present evidence on the role of passive smoking on lung cancer in non-smokers, his paper having proved seminal in the recent history of control of smoking.¹ At the conclusion of his address he received an adulatory vote of thanks from Professor Stanton Glantz, who named him as the person who had made the most important recent contribution to the control of smoking. Despite huge applause Professor Ernst Wynder, chairing the session, asked that further questions be about "scientific content" and not "politics."

Conference organisers are often faced with conflicting agenda over the need to break even financially and the desire to make some tangible progress. Financial considerations often dictate that papers of little merit or importance are accepted because of the need to swell the attendance. In Tokyo some 199 papers were crammed into two days, with only a fraction having more time than the 12 minutes (discussion included) allowed for presentations in special and free paper sessions. The result was both chaotic and superficial. The principal victims were certainly any development or obvious strengthening of global strategy and the abject neglect, beyond the now mandatory lip service, of any important focus on tobacco and the Third World.

Exploiting the Third World

Only 22 of the papers presented were delivered by delegates from the Third World, and of these, eight were small, local survey reports and a further two fundamental research reinventing the wheel and of questionable relevance in countries with a virtual absence of even basic measures of control. By the World Bank's classification the projected combined populations by the year 2000 of low income countries (for example, China, India, and Bangladesh), lower middle income countries (for example, Egypt, the Philippines, and Nigeria), and upper middle income countries (for example, Malaysia, Brazil, and Greece) will constitute 80% of the world's population (table).² Furthermore, the percentage aggregate increase in the populations of these countries from 1982 figures will be 41% compared with a growth in the population of industrial market and east European economies of only 8%.

The head of the World Health Organisation's Tobacco or Health

Programme reported that cigarette consumption is decreasing in the industrialised world by about 1% a year, whereas in Asia and Latin America it is growing 7% faster than the population and in Africa 18% faster (R Masironi and K Rothwell. Paper presented at conference).

Population figures (millions) in 1982 and projected for year 2000²

Type of economy	Year	
	1982	2000
Low income:		
China	1008	1196
India	717	994
Others	544	907
Lower middle income	673	1023
Upper middle income	490	718
Total	3432	4838
High income (exporting oil)	17	33
Industrial market	723	780
Eastern European non-market	384	431
Total	1124	1244

Except for those whose naïvety it has been able to exploit, the international tobacco industry has understandably long excluded advocates of the control of smoking from its own conferences. But in Tokyo, perhaps more than at previous conferences, strategists from the industry and several of its sympathetic scientists moved freely between the sessions on topics that really matter: taxation, countering the marketing of tobacco, and involuntary smoking. What would they have concluded, given their recent sales figures and forecasts for both industrialised countries and the Third World? Simply, that practically all the serious and even trivial opposition to the industry's trade and 95% of the success stories that were being told have taken place in countries with comparatively small populations, near zero population growths, and poor medium to long term futures as markets for tobacco.

In several Western countries control of smoking is rapidly looking like a public health success story, with the decline in the prevalence of smoking over 10 years now into double figures in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries, Hong Kong, and Singapore. But the industry must be losing little sleep about this in its global strategy. For example, Norway, for so long the jewel in the crown of a comprehensive policy on control of smoking, has a population of four million, which will be about the same by 2000, Nigeria, now with 91 million and smoking fast, will grow to 169 million in the same time. While conferences such as that in Tokyo hear papers such as "Smoking and health among the reindeer herders in northern Finland" or "Haemodynamic and humoral effects of cigarette smoking" from a Swiss group some 25 years and 30 000 papers after the first report on smoking and health by the Royal College of Physicians of London, the British, American, and now the Japanese transnational tobacco companies continue their unchallenged field days in the world's poorest and largest nations.

The arguments for control of smoking in many Third World countries will probably require quite different arguments from those that have spearheaded government action and changing opinion in communities in the West. International Union against Cancer has suggested four arguments,³ of which all but the first went quite unaddressed in Tokyo: diseases caused by smoking to the burden of ill health before infectious diseases and malnutrition have been conquered; buying cigarettes when there is dire poverty uses money needed for food; tobacco curing results in deforestation,

which has important effects on the environment; and most of the developing countries have a large deficit balance of trade in tobacco, importing far more than they either produce or export.

Optimism

So much for the pessimism. What were the optimistic signs? After the opening ceremony it was clear to many that an interesting facet of American cultural and scientific imperialism is its unquestioned presence (certainly by itself) as a world leader in control of smoking. Although the conference was hosted by Japan, the American Cancer Society blew its own well deserved trumpet as the largest sponsor of the conference. Then the absent United States Surgeon General loomed out from a massive video screen and blessed the delegates; Everett Koop has been a colossus in control of smoking, so few questioned his place in the ceremony. But America's role in smoking is not all about its control of the practice. Together with British American Tobacco the American transnational tobacco companies virtually control the expansion of smoking throughout the world. For me, Greg Connolly's paper, "American liberation of the Japanese cigarette market," which was based on government correspondence gathered under the United States's freedom of information legislation, was the pick of the conference.

Several delegates called for the admirable efforts of important non-governmental organisations such as the American Cancer Society to focus somewhat less on the health of citizens in the United States and more on domestically shaming (Halfdan Mahler's term) the international efforts of the tobacco industry. The American Cancer Society is no stranger to these responsibilities, having supported a growing programme of workshops on control of smoking in Latin America. But many were left with the feeling that it will no longer suffice for organised efforts in the West simply to call the industry names. Copies of letters sent in 1986 to the Honourable Sir David Akers-Jones, chief secretary of Hong Kong by Senator Bob Dole and three other United States senators and to Japanese president, His Excellency Yasuhiro Nakasone, by Senator Jesse Helms were circulated like clandestine, prurient literature throughout the conference. These letters left no room for any doubt that if you are seriously in the business of controlling smoking you must be seriously in the business of politics. The letters openly threatened trade sanctions should, respectively, Hong Kong ban smokeless tobacco (sold by the American Tobacco Company) and Japan continue its protectionist policies on tobacco that effectively keep American companies out of that lucrative market.

And so to Perth

The next world conference will be held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1989. Mike Daube, promoting this venue to the International Liaison Committee on Smoking and Health, emphasised that the industry and its fellow travellers would be excluded and therefore unable to eavesdrop on the latest tactics. This conference will have some 60 full bursaries available to delegates from the Third World, and in the intervening period a coalition of non-governmental international organisations and a mafia of various tacticians will be developing a set of strategies that will more vigorously and relevantly address the issues for the Third World. It is to be hoped that by the time of the conference in Perth the industry will have begun to feel troubled that it is being excluded from something that it does not already know about.

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