Tobacco lobby threatens to derail global antismoking treaty

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

World Health Organization officials say that a global anti-tobacco pact that becomes law on 27 February still has a long way to go before its tough anti-smoking measures are adopted in many countries.

WHO's 192 member states adopted the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2003. Since then, 168 countries have signed it; 55 of these have ratified it, but only a few have passed its terms into law.

The convention includes a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, marketing, and sponsorship; tough standards for health warnings on cigarette packets; and a ban on descriptions such as "lights" and "low tar."

At a meeting at WHO's headquarters in Geneva earlier, member states proposed creating an independent body to help them implement the treaty without becoming vulnerable to pressure from the tobacco industry.

Spokeswoman Marta Seoane said that governments had proposed that the treaty secretariat should be accountable to countries that ratify it and that it should be based at WHO. Japan, whose government partly owns and controls the world's third largest tobacco company, Japan Tobacco, had opposed the plan.

Ms Seoane said that WHO member states also agreed to

invite non-governmental organisations—who had lobbied hard to fend off industry pressure and push for a tough antismoking treaty—to meetings of the future secretariat.

They agreed that a screening mechanism was needed to keep out pseudoactivists in the pay of the tobacco industry. These proposals will be decided at a meeting in coming months.

"There's still a lot to do; the real work will start now at country level with the implementation of the treaty," Ms Seoane said, adding, "So far the response has been good."

The treaty was adopted despite a sustained campaign by the tobacco lobby via certain governments to dilute it—particularly the United States, Germany, and Japan.

Signs indicate, however, that pressure from the industry has not let up. At the Geneva meeting, the United States proposed

a clear reference to global trade rules in the future secretariat's rules of procedure, even though the legally binding treaty gives governments the right to prioritise health over trade issues.

"If this is adopted, advertising, labelling, all of these things could still be attacked under trade law," said Kathryn Mulvey of US non-governmental organisation, Corporate Accountability.

Tobacco companies have shifted their marketing focus away from the rich industrialised West to developing countries. Poor countries are now more vulnerable to the powerful tobacco industry and need support in implementing tough anti-tobacco measures.

Ms Mulvey said that recently a group of Kenyan parliamentarians was invited on a beach holiday by a tobacco company ahead of a debate in the Kenyan parliament on tobacco control. □

Smoke-free workplaces would hit tobacco profits

Lynn Eaton *London*

Tobacco multinationals would lose an estimated £310m (\$575m; €450m) in sales every year if UK workplaces were smoke free, claims the BMA's chairman, James Johnson.

His comments come in the foreword to a report, *Smoke-free World*, from the BMA's Tobacco Control Resource Centre, in which doctors' leaders from eight countries describe the success of antismoking legislation.

"Powerful vested interests peddle myths that smoke-free legislation is unnecessary," wrote Mr Johnson. "They say it is unworkable, unpopular, and will lead to economic ruin. Such predictions are little more than scaremongering. The evidence shows that smoke-free laws save lives."

In the report a statement from the Californian Medical Association seems to confirm this. Smoke-free laws were introduced in California in July 1998, and since then, says its president, Dr Robert Hertz, "California's

lung cancer rates have fallen six times faster than in US States without smoke-free laws."

Dr James Reilly, president of the Irish Medical Organisation, said that more than 7000 smokers quit in the six months before the ban on smoking in public places became law in March 2004.

In the recent white paper on public health for England, *Choosing Health—Making Healthy Choices Easier*, the health secretary, John Reid, announced plans that

will partially ban smoking in enclosed public places (*BMJ* 2004;329:1201, 20 Nov).

Vivienne Nathanson, BMA's head of science and ethics, said: "These doctors are telling us that partial measures don't work. If you work in a government building you'll be lucky, but if you work in a pub that does not serve food, you'll have a greater chance of developing lung cancer or heart disease."

"It's time for the UK government to play fair and protect

everyone from exposure to secondhand smoke at work."

Meanwhile in Cuba, a country renowned for its high quality tobacco used in cigars, a ban has been announced on smoking in public places, including hospitals and workplaces. According to official statistics, 32% of Cubans smoke. □

Smoke-free World is available at www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/smokefreeworld

STEPHEN FERRY/LASOWGETTY IMAGES

Cuban workplaces, including this cigar factory, are now subject to a smoking ban