

Can the Dutch Government really be abandoning smokers to their fate?

The Government of the Netherlands has announced that it is all but closing down its tobacco control operations. It has already weakened its existing smoke-free laws. It will reverse a previous decision to ensure that smokers who want to stop but cannot do so by themselves receive evidence-based treatment to help them.¹ And it plans to close down the world-renowned national centre on tobacco control, STIVORO. This at a time when smoking prevalence in the Netherlands is relatively high among western countries at 27%,² resulting in an estimated almost 20 000 premature deaths per year.³

Moreover, cross-country comparative findings from the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project⁴ show that Dutch smokers are the least knowledgeable or concerned about the harms of smoking and second-hand smoke of all the 12 countries covered—by a substantial margin (figure). These findings indicate that the Dutch Government should not be cutting

funding for tobacco control but should instead be increasing its efforts to reduce smoking in line with its commitments as a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The contrast with the UK could not be more stark. The English Department of Health recently published an ambitious tobacco-control strategy that is both comprehensive and evidence-based.⁵ It recognises that tobacco is lethal and addictive and that society as a whole has a responsibility to encourage and help smokers who want to stop and to prevent young people getting addicted.

It would be a matter of no little shame to a country that prides itself on a compassionate and inclusive ethos if its government were to abandon smokers to their fate. Every death that ensued would not just be the responsibility of the tobacco industry, which continues to promote its lethal product, but also of every politician in the Dutch Government who chose to look the other way and allow it to happen.

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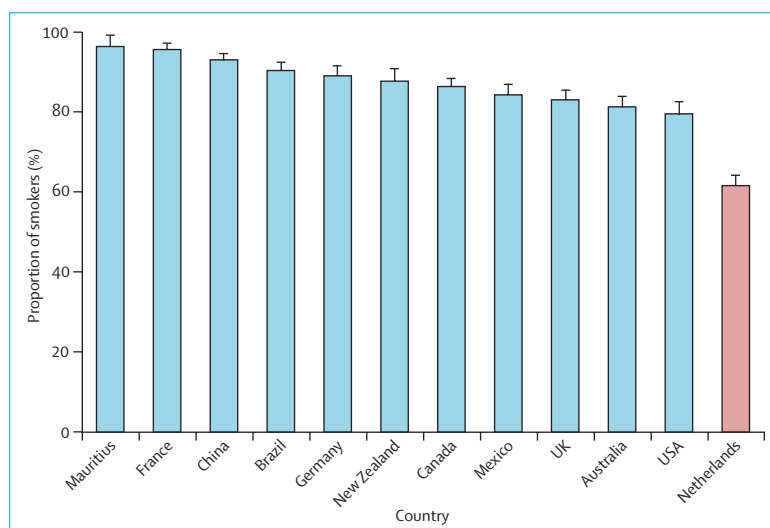


Figure: Proportion of smokers who agree that smoking is dangerous to non-smokers
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