The International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project

ITC Netherlands Survey

MARCH 2011

Report on Smokers’ Awareness of the Health Risks of Smoking and Exposure to Second-hand Smoke
THE NEED FOR TOBACCO EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS IN THE NETHERLANDS: EVIDENCE FROM THE ITC PROJECT

As a Party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) since June 2003, the Netherlands is required to implement effective public education programs as one of several measures to reduce the demand for tobacco. Article 12 of the FCTC requires Parties to promote and strengthen public awareness of tobacco control issues through 1) implementing education and public awareness programs on the health risks of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke and the benefits of tobacco cessation; and 2) providing public access to information on the tobacco industry.1 Recent Guidelines for the implementation of Article 12 and a list of resources developed by the Article 12 Working Group, WHO’s Tobacco Free Initiative, WHO regional offices and other partners have increased the capacity for Parties to launch effective public education campaigns.2

The International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project in the Netherlands (the ITC Netherlands Project) was launched in 2007 by researchers from Maastricht University, STIVORO, ASCoR (University of Amsterdam) and Leiden University Medical Centre working in collaboration with the University of Waterloo (Canada), the lead organization for the ITC Project. Findings from the fourth survey wave of 2,060 adult smokers conducted in May-June 2010 indicate that Dutch smokers fall far behind 11 other ITC countries on key measures of knowledge and awareness of the health risks of smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke. In fact, Dutch smokers ranked lowest on 3 out of 4 smoking risk knowledge and awareness measures (and second lowest on the fourth measure) compared to 11 other countries. These findings are very alarming particularly because of the Dutch Minister of Health’s recent decision to discontinue funding for media campaigns to educate smokers on the health risks of smoking and second-hand smoke and to motivate and assist smokers in quitting.

Dutch smokers lack a basic understanding of the dangers of second-hand smoke

The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2010 report How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioural Basis for Smoking-Attributed Disease provides indisputable evidence that exposure to tobacco smoke – even occasional smoking or second-hand smoke – causes immediate damage that can lead to serious illness or death. In 2009, the U.S. Institute of Medicine conducted an extensive international review of studies showing that even short-term exposure to second-hand smoke can lead to a heart attack, and that smoke-free laws prevent heart attacks.3

The ITC Netherlands Survey demonstrates clearly that Dutch smokers are much less aware of the dangers of second-hand smoke than are smokers in other countries. Only 61% of Dutch smokers agreed that cigarette smoke is dangerous to non-smokers. This is considerably lower than smokers in the UK (83%), Germany (89%), and France (96%) (see Figure 1).

Dutch smokers have the lowest awareness that cigarette smoke is dangerous to non-smokers compared to smokers in 11 other ITC countries.


Evidence that Dutch campaigns work

Evaluation of Dutch mass media campaigns have demonstrated that these efforts to encourage quitting have been successful. A combination of a worksite smoking ban and an intensive mass media intervention resulted in a reduction in smoking prevalence in the general population from 30% to 28% in 2004. In 2008, STIVORO conducted a national mass media campaign to encourage and support smokers in quitting. The ITC Netherlands Survey showed that the campaign was effective in enhancing determinants of smoking cessation. Other studies have shown that when campaigns lose funding, their impact is almost immediately reduced. To be most successful, research and experience shows that public education campaigns must be well funded, sustained over the long term, and integrated with other elements of a comprehensive tobacco reduction plan.

The majority of Dutch smokers do not think about the harm of smoking to themselves and others

Evidence suggests that thinking about the negative effects of smoking can be helpful in motivating smokers to quit. However, the Netherlands has the lowest percentage of smokers who ‘often’ or ‘very often’ think about the harm of smoking to themselves and to others compared to 11 other ITC countries. Only 20% of Dutch smokers ‘often’ or ‘very often’ thought about the harm that smoking causes to themselves in the last month compared to 39% of smokers in Germany, 48% in France, and 54% in the United Kingdom (see Figure 3). In a second disturbing finding, only 9% of Dutch smokers ‘often’ or ‘very often’ thought about the harm that their smoking causes to others in the last month compared to 20% of smokers in Germany, 34% in France, and 42% in the United Kingdom (see Figure 4).

Implications of the Findings - Mass Media Campaigns Matter

Public education campaigns are an essential component of a comprehensive national tobacco use prevention and cessation strategy, particularly as the tobacco industry devises new ways to market and promote their products. Empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of well funded public education campaigns is vast and growing. ITC evidence shows that tobacco use in Dutch society is widely accepted. The ITC findings clearly demonstrate that the Dutch government should increase, rather than discontinue, funding for tobacco education campaigns to increase awareness of the health effects of smoking, to encourage and support cessation, and to change the social context of tobacco use in the Netherlands.

With respect to specific diseases, the Health Council of the Netherlands reported in 2003 that an average exposure to environmental tobacco smoke can cause lung cancer. The increase in the odds of lung cancer is 20%, resulting in several hundred lung cancer deaths per year in the Netherlands. The 2010 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report drew a similar conclusion. The ITC survey shows (see Figure 2) that Dutch smokers were less aware that second-hand smoke causes lung cancer in non-smokers (70%) than 10 of 11 other ITC countries, doing better only than China (68%), which is well-known for its lack of public education on smoking. In contrast, 94% of smokers in France and 79% of smokers in the United Kingdom are aware. By informing people of the health harms of second-hand smoke, they can make informed decisions, such as whether they should smoke in the presence of their children. It is clear that in the Netherlands, there is a strong need for such education.


THE ITC INTERNATIONAL TEAM

The ITC International Research team includes over 80 tobacco control researchers in 20 countries worldwide. Its Principal Investigators are:

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Funding for ITC Netherlands Project

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The ITC Project continues to explore opportunities for collaborating with low and middle income countries to help policy makers design, implement, and evaluate FCTC policies.

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THE ITC PROJECT: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF FCTC POLICIES IN...

20 countries • 50% of the world’s population • 60% of the world’s smokers • 70% of the world’s tobacco users