# Smoke-screen

Global trends in tobacco have become clear in the last 30 years. Consumption is increasing, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

## MOST CRITICAL REGION

The situation is most critical in Asia-Pacific as more than one-third of the 1.2 billion smokers in the world are found in the region. China alone has 300 to 350 million smokers. Even more disturbing is the tobacco industry's admission that it intends to increase consumption in the region by 33 percent in the decade to the year 2000.

In the Pacific, while there have been few significant prevalence surveys, recent data show the rate to be among the highest in the world.

## PREMATURE DEATH AND DISEASE

To neglect the issue of smoking in the Pacific is to consign many of the island populations to premature death and disease. Tobacco smoking remains the most significant cause of death and preventable disease.

These concerns have been expressed in 57,000 scientific publications which have shown the following:
- smoking kills three million people annually;
- 50 percent of people who smoke long-term die from this;
- heart attacks at midlife are five to six times more likely in smokers than non-smokers;
- the possibility of nearly all cancers increases with smoking, and lung cancers are particularly common in smokers;
- long-term smokers who die from smoking lose 15-20 years of their life.

"The tobacco industry is probably responsible for more premature deaths and illness than any other organized commercial enterprise, exceeding the destructive impact of the arms and illicit drugs industries," Professor Nicholas Wald said in a recent publication on tobacco and health.

## OPEN DEFIANCE

In the absence of legislative requirements, the tobacco industries have continuously neglected the health concerns of the Pacific. In Fiji, cigarette companies have ignored Ministry of Health recommendations for the past 20 years. In Western Samoa, the Rothmans factory is half-owned by the government while in the Solomon Islands, a new tobacco factory has just been completed. In Vanuatu, the tobacco industry has bypassed Australian regulations despite promises of compliance made in 1991 and 1995.

Regional governments must take action, either through their own legislatures or by means of a joint initiative, to ensure healthy islands and communities that are not negated by the commercial interests of a few. The World Health Organization suggests the following key elements:
- bans on all tobacco advertising;
- stringent health warnings on tobacco product packaging;
- substantial taxes on tobacco products;
- increased spending on tobacco control programs, to be offset in part by increased taxes on tobacco products or tobacco company revenues;
- restrictions on minors' access to cigarettes;
- aid and re-training for displaced tobacco agricultural workers.

Other measures needed to control the problem include: country-based comprehensive legislation; strong measures to educate the public; support from health leaders and doctors; and country workshops to support these initiatives.

*Source:* "The Smoking Gun of the Pacific," a paper presented to the 15th Regional Conference of Heads of Health Services in March 1996 by Dr. Harley Stanton.