

Kiss a non-smoker: Taste the difference!

Frances Cowell

The WHO reports that smokers harm our planet, oceans, atmosphere and non-smokers even more than they do themselves.

The European Network's Frances Cowell believes a new debate is needed.

Summer is on us at last! And how we are looking forward to those balmy afternoons on café terraces or picnics in the park. A gentle, fragrant breeze adding to the long-awaited pleasure....

Unless someone lights up a cigarette and spoils it all with toxic smoke. You try to maintain your smile as you struggle to breathe, cover your nose and mouth and rummage for your Ventolin.

You might also ask what is in cigarettes today that makes them smell so awful, and so much worse than pure tobacco cigarettes. Lots, it turns out, as a little announced 2017 report by the WHO makes clear. "Tobacco and its environmental impact: an overview" explains the effects today's tobacco products have on our lungs, our skin, our planet and its atmosphere.

Smoking kills. Kills who, though? Not just the smoker: it turns out that passive smoking, what the WHO calls "side-stream" smoke, is even more dangerous than "main-stream" smoke. In fact, fresh side-stream smoke, when inhaled, is approximately four times more toxic, and the condensates it emits two to six times more carcinogenic than main-stream smoke inhaled by the smoker. "... tobacco smoke is a complex mixture of thousands of chemical compounds in the form of gases and microscopically small droplets suspended in the air" that, even while it is being "smoked", harms innocent by-standers, including children, more than it harms the smoker.

Were cigarettes food, they would be subject to strict labelling requirements that show how toxic they are. Nicotine is a powerful and harmful drug, yet does not require a doctor's prescription. Does this not strike you as odd?

The volumes are hardly trivial: in 2012 alone, one billion smokers consumed about 6.25 trillion cigarettes, emitting 3,000-6,000 metric tonnes of formaldehyde and 12,000-47,000 metric tonnes of nicotine; as well as lots of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxides.

What's more, cigarette smoke doesn't "go up in smoke", but continues to cause harm by leaving residues on surfaces and in dust long after the product has been smoked. This residue becomes even more toxic as it ages chemically. It's what gives the clothes of smokers their distinctive odour. It smells bad because it is.

Then there is the waste: between 340 and 680 million kilograms of it litters the world each year. Cigarette butts and discarded packets are a common enough eyesore; cleaning them up is a significant drain on municipal budgets - money that

could be used for other essential community services. But it is not just the volume of waste that is a problem. That waste contains over 7,000 toxic chemicals, including known human carcinogens, which leach into and accumulate in the environment. Cellulose acetate-based cigarette filters do not biodegrade under most circumstances, and when they do disintegrate, they leach yet more of those nasty compounds into our environment. All this toxic waste ends up on our streets, in our water, water ways and oceans. Discarded butts leach nicotine, arsenic and heavy metals into the environment and can be acutely toxic to aquatic organisms.

The damage begins with tobacco cultivation, or even earlier, if you count the deforestation and loss of biodiversity when land is cleared for it. As usual, people in poor countries get the worst of it. Why? Because Big Tobacco drives up its profits by growing tobacco where land and labour are cheap and health and environmental regulations laxer. While tending crops and harvesting, plantation workers, many of whom are children, are exposed to Green Tobacco Sickness, which results from wet tobacco being absorbed by their skin and is manifest as nausea, vomiting, dizziness and headaches. And because tobacco tends to be grown without crop rotation, it demands more pesticides and other nasty chemicals, many of which, such as DDT, are so harmful that they are banned in wealthier countries. Tobacco also tends to deplete soil more rapidly than other crops, which means that the 4.3 billion hectares given over to tobacco cultivation needs to be constantly replenished with newly cleared land to maintain crop sizes. Logging to provide wood for curing adds more damage.

Then there is the harm to people and the environment from manufacture and transport of cigarettes. The WHO sets out at least eight sources of resource depletion and other environmental harm, including chemicals used in preparation and treatment of tobacco leaf, metals and energy used to make and ship cigarette-making machines, energy in making and shipping tobacco products, extraction and processing of cellulose acetate fibres, effluent and emissions from cigarette making, thousands of chemical additives, flavourings and pH modifiers such as ammonia, as well as transport of the finished products to get them into lungs. Increasing use of plastics in packaging only adds to this distressing list.

Universal, mainly taxpayer-funded, health care means that we pay, through our taxes, for expensive, often avoidable treatments for both smokers and non-smokers. Some governments, and most tobacco companies, argue that those costs are offset by huge sums collected each year in taxes and other duties on tobacco products. The WHO report calls those offset claims into serious doubt.

Smokers often assume that smoking out-doors is inoffensive and harmless. In many places, it is seen as an inalienable personal right. More sensible would be to give precedence to the basic human right not to smoke.

After all, smokers have a choice not to smoke. Non-smokers have no such choice.

The WHO report should be widely read to inform a sensible debate about the real costs and infringement of personal rights by those who still choose to smoke cigarettes.

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