

## EU waters down its plan to restrict tobacco advertising

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Plans to restrict tobacco advertising throughout the European Union have been severely watered down after running into fierce opposition from a small but influential group of members of the European parliament (MEPs).

After blocking the proposed legislation for 16 months, the European parliament's legal affairs committee approved a series of amendments earlier this month that remove much of the substance from the draft legislation.

It is insisting that the new rules should not cover indirect advertising (the labelling of other products with tobacco brands) and should be limited to cases with "significant cross-border effects"—a requirement which, for example, would exempt local radio stations from the EU ban.

Similarly, tobacco sponsor-

ship of radio programmes would be prohibited only where these are targeted at more than one country. Governments would also have the option—rather than be required, as stated in the original proposal—to restrict advertising to publications intended exclusively for the tobacco trade.

The amendments have been largely championed by German MEPs. They have alarmed health campaigners, who argue that the legislation is necessary to discourage young people in particular from becoming addicted to tobacco from an early age as a result of advertising, marketing, sponsorship, and other promotional devices.

Andrew Hayes, the EU liaison officer for the Association of European Cancer Leagues, said: "We are very worried. The proposal was already very weak, and indirect advertising has now

become a huge loophole. We are also concerned that the draft legislation does not contain a safeguard clause stating that member states can go further on public health grounds."

Supporters of a more comprehensive advertising ban are now hoping that the amendments will be overturned by the full European parliament when it votes on the legislation during its November plenary session in Strasbourg. The new rules are designed to fill the vacuum created by the European Court of Justice when it annulled the previous legislation in October 2000, maintaining that some aspects of the advertising ban exceeded the European Union's powers.

The European Commission promptly tabled new proposals taking account of the court's ruling the following May. However, in a bid to delay approval of the legislation, the parliament's legal affairs committee took 16 months, instead of the usual six, to give its opinion. The BMA was one of many organisations to criticise the filibustering tactics. □

## WHO warns of heart disease threat to developing world

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

The number of people who die or are disabled by heart disease and strokes could be halved with wider use of a combination of drugs that costs just \$14 (£9; €14) a year, the World Health Organization has said.

Every year 12 million people worldwide die from cardiovascular disease, according to the WHO, with most of them in the developing world. The organisation will be focusing on heart disease when it publishes its annual report at the end of the month.

The report shows for the first time that the main risk factors for cardiovascular disease—high blood pressure, high cholesterol level, and smoking—which are traditionally linked to an affluent lifestyle, are now being seen in

middle income and poorer countries.

But if everyone at high risk of having a heart attack or stroke was given a combination of a statin for lowering cholesterol, a low dose blood pressure lowering drug, and aspirin then this number could be cut by 50%. More people in the developed world should be given this treatment, says the report, while new resources should be found to treat people in countries where the combination is unaffordable.

The WHO also calls for more measures to reduce cardiovascular risk in the population as a whole. It argues that there is increasing evidence to show that it is not just people whose blood pressure or cholesterol level is above a given "threshold" who are at risk of cardiovascular disease. In fact, most people would benefit from lowering their blood pressure and cholesterol level, and national education programmes should tackle these issues.

"Prevention is the key to lowering the global disease burden of heart attacks and strokes," says Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, director general of the WHO. "The ideal strategy for many countries would be to devote

many more resources to introduce broad measures that can benefit whole populations and at the same time target those at elevated risk with the combination of pills."

The report highlights how government campaigns have led to less salt being used in manufactured foods in the United Kingdom, better blood pressure management in Japan, and a fall in saturated fat intake in the United States.

"If we consider the dramatic improvement in cardiovascular health that, for example, the Japanese and the Finns have experienced in the last few decades, we can see that entire populations have been able to significantly improve their situations without any change in their gene pool," said Dr Christopher Murray, executive director of the cluster on evidence and information policy at the WHO.

"Clearly diet, exercise, and a reduction in tobacco and alcohol are the most important factors to consider," he added. □

*World Health Report 2002: Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life* will be accessible from the end of October on [www.who.int/whr](http://www.who.int/whr)



*Exhibition reveals the beauty of the human heart*

"Reflect on your responsibility" is a single metalwork representation of the coronary veins, placed in front of a mirror to encourage viewers to reflect on themselves.

It is part of the Tree of Life exhibition, which comprises work by 11 artists and four children and which opens at the Royal College of Physicians in London on 22 October.

The aim of the exhibition, organised by Dr Geoffrey Farrer-Brown, a retired consultant histopathologist, is to help people understand the importance of the heart and its blood supply. He hopes that when people see its beauty, they will ask themselves: "Why damage this beauty by smoking?"

Artists were shown photographs of the normal and the diseased heart and its blood supply, and were allowed to interpret the topic in any way they chose. Materials in the exhibition include mosaic, wood, ceramic, enamel, and fibre-optic lights.

The exhibition, which is supported by the British Heart Foundation, runs until 6 December and then transfers to the Sheridan Russell Gallery, Crawford Street, London. □  
Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*