Tobacco Control Plan for England

Oral Question, House of Lords
23rd February 2017

About the BMA
The British Medical Association (BMA) is an apolitical professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

We are a member of the SFAC (Smokefree Action Coalition), a group of organisations committed to promoting public health and reducing the harm caused by tobacco.

Doctors witness first-hand the devastating effects of smoking-related diseases on their patients, and so we have a long history of supporting measures to reduce tobacco-related harm. Despite a long-term decline in smoking prevalence in the UK, nearly one in five adults still smoke and tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable premature death and ill health, accounting for around 100,000 deaths per annum. The BMA is deeply concerned that an estimated 207,000 children and adolescents (aged 11-15) take up smoking every year in the UK.

The government must introduce a new tobacco control strategy, without delay, to replace the outdated tobacco control plan, ‘Healthy Lives, Healthy People: a tobacco control plan for England’. A new strategy is vital for England to achieve a continued decline in smoking rates.

Executive summary

- A new tobacco control strategy is urgently needed in England to replace the five year plan introduced by the Government (2011-15). A comprehensive and sustained strategy is essential to reduce the incidence of smoking-related diseases and to achieve a tobacco-free society by 2035, which the BMA believes is an important goal.
- To be successful, this strategy must focus on four key tobacco control goals:
  1. discouraging and deterring people from starting to smoke (prevention);
  2. reducing the harm caused by smoking and helping smokers to cut down and quit;
  3. protecting others from second hand smoke;
  4. de-normalising tobacco products and reducing the influence of the tobacco industry.
- It is vital that the Government supports these tobacco control goals through a variety of approaches: policy and legislative changes; education and information campaigns; smoking cessation services and harm reduction approaches; and measures which impose greater accountability on the tobacco industry.

1 The BMA believes the Government should aim to achieve a ‘tobacco-free society’ by 2035, in which five per cent, or less, of the UK population are smokers, and there is only a nominal level of mortality from tobacco-related diseases.
**Tobacco control strategy**

The BMA has a long history of supporting measures to reduce tobacco-related harm and we welcome the long-term decline in overall smoking rates in the UK\(^2\), which has been supported by the tobacco control policies introduced by successive governments. It is clear, though, that more needs to be done as approximately one in five adults still smoke, and an estimated 207,000 children and adolescents (aged 11-15) take up smoking every year\(^3\). This is deeply concerning.

A new tobacco control strategy is long overdue – the Government’s most recent tobacco control plan, *‘Healthy Lives, Healthy People: a tobacco control plan for England’*, concluded at the end of December 2015. We believe it is essential that a new strategy is introduced, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that smoking rates continue to decline, and to achieve our aspiration of a tobacco-free society by 2035.

As stated by ASH (Action on Smoking and Health), any future tobacco control strategy must be “comprehensive, and sustained, in order to achieve on-going reductions in smoking prevalence.” Without such an approach, “smoking prevalence could easily start to rise again”\(^4\). The BMA’s own report, *‘Promoting a tobacco-free society’*\(^5\), makes a number of specific recommendations as to what a comprehensive and sustainable tobacco control strategy should include:

- increasing taxation on all tobacco products above the rate of inflation and, specifically, increasing the tobacco tax escalator from two to five per cent above inflation
- introducing a minimum consumption tax for all tobacco products to ensure all cigarettes are taxed at the same level and removing the price differential between hand-rolled and manufactured cigarettes
- implementing a positive licensing scheme for the sale of tobacco products, thereby tightening limits on the amount of tobacco that is legally on sale and supporting restrictions on who is able to buy tobacco products
- continuing to reduce tobacco marketing opportunities
- removing exemptions to smokefree legislation
- limiting pro-smoking imagery in entertainment media
- supporting smokers to quit by providing adequately funded, targeted smoking cessation services.

**Regulatory framework**

**Reducing the appeal and uptake of smoking by children and young people**

It is deeply concerning that 207,000 children and adolescents (aged 11-15) take up smoking every year in the UK. Therefore, we welcomed measures in the recently introduced Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016, which aim to reduce the uptake of smoking by children and young people. These measures include:

- tobacco health warnings that combine text and picture health warnings covering 65 per cent of the external front and back surfaces
- the removal of cheaper packs containing less than 20 cigarettes from the market
- restrictions on the use of characterising flavours to ensure they do not increase the appeal of tobacco products to children and young people.

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In addition, we have supported legislation to introduce standardised packaging of tobacco products. These are all vital measures to deter young people from taking up smoking and reducing the incidence of smoking-related diseases. It is important that a new tobacco control plan is introduced to build on these important measures, and to help support a continued reduction in smoking prevalence.

**Product development**

Within a new tobacco control strategy, a strengthening of the nicotine regulatory framework in order to control and limit the development of new tobacco products must be put in place. This is essential to tackle the development of new products (such as smokeless tobacco) by the tobacco industry, which is adapting to maintain its market share following the significant decline in smoking rates in recent years.

The development of new products has the effect of allowing companies to continue to develop their brand, and increases the accessibility of tobacco. The BMA is particularly concerned that tobacco companies are able to introduce smokeless tobacco-based products onto the market with limited regulation.

**Public health policy-making**

**Tobacco industry accountability**

We believe that a key aspect of promoting a tobacco-free society is to exclude the tobacco industry from involvement in public health policy-making at all levels of Government. This reflects the fundamental and irreconcilable conflict that exists between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health interests.

Given the substantial burden placed on society by smoking, we believe it is essential that the new tobacco control plan places a requirement on the tobacco industry to increase their contribution to managing the burden caused by tobacco-related disease. They should be required to fund policies and measures to ease the harm caused by tobacco products.

Specifically, we support the introduction of a ‘polluter pays’ annual levy on tobacco companies, which has mainstream political and public support. The levy would need to be applied proportionally according to a company’s market share – research from ASH suggests it could generate £500million annually⁶. We agree with ASH’s recommendation that the tobacco industry should be “entirely excluded”⁷ from the oversight and distribution of any such levy, and the tobacco control measures it funds.

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