

Hong Kong tobacco deaths presage vast China epidemic

A huge epidemic of smoking-related deaths is forecast for China, whose inhabitants account for 20% of the world's population and smoke 30% of the world's cigarettes. A study carried out in Hong Kong and reported in the 18 August *British Medical Journal* suggests that estimated deaths in China caused by smoking could rise from the current 1 million a year to about 3 million a year during the 2040s. In Hong Kong, cigarette consumption peaked in the early 1970s — about 20 years earlier than in mainland China.

Sir Richard Peto, co-director of the Clinical Trials Service Unit at the University of Oxford and one of the authors of the study, told the *Bulletin*: "The results of this study make it clear that Chinese populations can have substantial proportions of deaths caused by tobacco. Yet going back to the 1980s, there was a general conviction in China that cigarette smoking was not a serious health problem." As recently as 1997, he said, a survey presented to the 10th World Conference on Tobacco or Health held that year in Beijing had found that 96% of Chinese adults in the general population did not know that smoking could cause heart disease, and 60% did not know that smoking could cause lung cancer.

The Hong Kong study was carried out by Professor Lam Tai Hing of the University of Hong Kong, together with colleagues in Hong Kong, and Peto. It was based on records and verbal accounts of more than 27 000 ethnic Chinese, aged 35 and over, whose deaths were registered in Hong Kong in 1998. Using a questionnaire completed usually by the person reporting the death, the researchers sought information about the cause of death and the dead person's lifestyle, including information on his or her smoking habits 10 years before death (before illness could have modified the person's smoking habits). These details were compared with those of living controls of the same age.

Analysis of the Hong Kong data showed that tobacco caused about 33% of all male deaths at ages 35–69, plus 5% of all female deaths — in other words, 25% of all deaths at these ages. For comparison, in

the European Union, the proportion of deaths caused by smoking among adults aged 35–69 years in 1995 was estimated to be 32% for males and 10% for females, according to updated figures from a study published by Peto and co-workers in 1994 (*Mortality from smoking in developed countries, 1950–2000*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994).

Unless many adult smokers in China give up the habit, Peto said, deaths there from smoking could triple from the current level to 3 million a year during the 2040s and could total 100 million between now and 2050. Some of this rise would be due to population growth in China and some would be due to "maturation" of the epidemic of smoking-related deaths. As long, though, as China remains the largest market for cigarettes in the world, with about 60% of males addicted to the habit, its chances of avoiding the impending epidemic of smoking deaths are certainly slim. ■

Sharon Kingman, *London, UK*

AIDS decimates African teachers

Once thought to be a primary resource for preventing HIV infection, the education systems of Africa's sub-Saharan countries are being devastated by the AIDS pandemic, according to reports announced at a global education conference held recently in Thailand.

In Botswana, for example, 35–40% of secondary school teachers are infected with HIV, conference delegates learned. And in 1999, 100 000 South African children lost their teachers to AIDS. "In the next 10 years," said Ms Monique Foulhoux, AIDS specialist with the nongovernmental organization Education International, "if nothing is done, teachers will completely disappear in Africa."

The statistics do not surprise the experts. "Teachers are in the age-group where HIV prevalence is highest in the general population," says Dr. Bernhard Schwartlander of UNAIDS. "Teachers are [also] more concentrated in urban areas where HIV prevalence is higher."

The Kenya Institute of Education and UNICEF have joined forces to train as many as 7000 teachers in HIV/AIDS education.



Cindy Ho

Child smokers will help swell the epidemic of tobacco deaths likely to engulf China.

While the primary goal of the intervention may be to pass knowledge on to school-children, it is hoped that the training will improve prevention practices for teachers as well. "We should assume," Schwartlander says, "that teachers have better access to knowledge and are better educated on average. Prevalence rates should decrease faster in this group [than in the general population] once interventions are introduced."

In the meantime, the education system continues to suffer. UNICEF's *Progress of Nations 2000* report states that efforts to implement school-based programmes to educate children about HIV and AIDS are being thwarted as the little funding that is available is being funnelled away from prevention and into other AIDS services. ■

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