

WHO attacks tobacco sponsorship of sports



PHOTO DPA/Oliver Muthaupt

Thumbs up for Michael Schumacher (left) and Eddie Irvine for their performance at a recent Grand Prix championship, but thumbs down by WHO for Big Tobacco sponsorship of this and other sports.

In late November, WHO joined forces with the international governing bodies of motor racing, football, and the Olympic Games, as well as with well-known athletes, in a drive to sweep Big Tobacco out of sporting arenas worldwide. The launch of the “Tobacco Free Sports” campaign, as this drive is called, coincided with the gathering in Geneva of government representatives of WHO’s 191 member states for the third round of negotiations on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), an international treaty that seeks, among other things, strong controls over global advertising and sponsoring activities by the tobacco industry.

“Tobacco is a communicated disease. It is communicated through advertising and sponsorship. The most pernicious and pervasive form of that marketing is found in sports stadiums and arenas worldwide,” said WHO Director-General Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland at the launch.

The main goal of the campaign, Dr Derek Yach, WHO executive director for noncommunicable diseases and mental health, told the *Bulletin*, is “to keep tobacco products out of

sporting events and to encourage more people, especially young ones, to engage in sports. We want to get rid of a bad thing and promote a good one because we see that the two just don’t mix. It’s an unhealthy association.”

Mr Johann Koss, Norwegian four-time Gold Medallist in speedskating and chairman of Olympic Aid, an athlete-led humanitarian nongovernmental organization, couldn’t agree more. “Tobacco and sport do not belong together. As athletes and role models, we will try to eliminate all forms

of tobacco in all levels of sport,” he commented to the *Bulletin*.

What’s more, adds Yach, linking the sport’s excitement to smoking makes sporting events the number one route for tobacco manufacturers to target the world’s youth. Experts estimate that tobacco companies pump at a minimum tens of millions of dollars each year into sponsoring major sports events. In the United States alone, according to the US Federal Trade Commission, the major domestic cigarette companies reported spending more than US\$ 110 million on sporting events in 1999. And their strategy seems to pay off. When British American Tobacco (BAT) took over sponsorship of the India–New Zealand cricket series held in India in 1996, a survey conducted a few months later in the Indian state of Goa (and published in the 17 August 1996 *British Medical Journal*) showed that the likelihood of children experimenting with tobacco almost doubled.

About a year ago, WHO started approaching leading sports organizations to try and hammer out a plan to ban tobacco sponsoring for all major sporting events. For the 22 November launch WHO had teamed up with the CDC, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA).

It seems that WHO’s ideas are falling on fertile ground. The FIA plans to introduce a worldwide ban on

Science historian predicts a billion deaths from tobacco by end of the century

- In a recent study published in the October issue of *Nature Cancer Reviews*, science historian Professor Robert Proctor from the Pennsylvania State University predicts that, if left unchecked, tobacco products will cause up to one billion deaths by the end of the 21st century.
- From historical sources Proctor calculated that there is about one lung cancer death for every three million cigarettes consumed worldwide. In 1990 world consumption already amounted to 6 trillion cigarettes per year. By current global smoking rates and future trends, smoking will have killed about one billion people by 2100, according to Proctor’s calculation.
- Already today, tobacco is responsible for the deaths of more than four million people every year. By 2020, WHO estimates, the toll will be around 8.4 million per year and by 2030, could reach 30 million, mainly because of the increase in smoking in developing countries. By 2020, 70% of smoking-related deaths will occur in developing countries.



Poster of the international *Tobacco Free Sports* campaign.

tobacco advertising and sponsoring in all FIA-sponsored events from the end of the 2006 season, following a resolution of FIA's World Motor Sport Council from October 2000. This ban includes the FIA's cash cow, Formula One, which enjoys at least US\$ 350 million in tobacco sponsorship, according to an FIA estimate: this is widely believed to be more than is spent on tobacco sponsorship of any other single sport.

The FIFA and the IOC are one step further ahead. Since the late 1980s, the Olympics and the soccer World Cup have been tobacco-free, and the kick-off of the upcoming World Cup in Japan and Korea on 31 May 2002 will coincide with WHO's World No Tobacco Day. A perfect opportunity to spread the message, Yach notes. "The World Cup will be the most watched sporting event ever; it has an enormous power to influence people," he says.

WHO's concerted effort to make sports smoke-free comes on the heels of a similar proposal from tobacco manufacturers themselves. On 10 September, BAT, Philip Morris and Japan Tobacco announced a new code of conduct on international marketing standards to prevent sales activities specifically tailored to appeal to young people. The voluntary measures, due to come into force in early 2003, would eliminate sponsorship of sporting events, advertising on the Internet, TV and radio, and celebrity endorsements.

So why does WHO need its Tobacco Free Sports campaign? "Tobacco

companies can't be trusted," says WHO's Yach. "We urge governments not to accept any self-regulation. They haven't worked in the past and they won't work in the future," he says. For Yach, the announcement of voluntary marketing restrictions is "just another attempt by the industry to persuade governments that there's no need for a strong framework convention".

Currently under negotiation, the framework convention would be the first legally enforceable international treaty on tobacco control attempting to curb deaths from smoking-related illnesses, which, according to WHO estimates, kill about four million people each year [see Box]. With the third round of negotiations completed in late November, Yach is cautiously optimistic: "The basis for a really strong convention is there," he says. Talks will resume next March. Yach thinks that negotiations are "still on target" for the convention to be completed in time for adoption by the World Health Assembly in May 2003. ■

Michael Hagmann, *Zurich, Switzerland*

WHO head visits DPR Korea

On her first visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in mid-November, WHO Director-General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, found a country struggling with a daunting catalogue of deprivation: "They are poor, they have a big burden of disease,

and children are suffering," she told journalists after her visit.

The main purpose of Brundtland's visit was to open a permanent WHO office in Pyongyang, the capital, where only three other UN organizations have a permanent representative — the World Food Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, and UNICEF. During her visit she met with Mr Kim Yong Nam, President of the Praesidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, Foreign Minister Mr Kim Yong Nam, and Health Minister Dr Kim Su Hak.

Outside of major cities, medical resources, she noted, particularly medicines, are sorely lacking, as are other essentials, such as clean running water and electricity. There is also a lack of reliable information: "We don't have a full picture of everything ... we don't have concrete numbers."

What information there is, however, suggests that some malnutrition persists despite food aid and a better harvest this year. Diseases related to malnutrition are certainly rife, particularly among children. The country is also facing an upsurge of malaria — an estimated 300 000 cases have occurred this year — as well as of tuberculosis, which currently affects about 33 000 people. Overall mortality has also been on the upswing and the current mortality rate is about 30–40% higher than 15 years ago, equivalent to an increase from 1.4 million to 2 million deaths a year in a population of 22 million.

Brundtland said the country "will need to give health a higher priority and channel more of its own resources towards ensuring that basic health services can be provided. But it cannot do so on its own." WHO has appealed to the international community to donate US\$ 8 million to restoring what in the 1960s and 1970s was an extensive, well-functioning health system providing free care to all. ■

John Maurice, *Bulletin*