



Use sports, films to curb tobacco use

Dr A K Dewan, June 23, 2015, DHNS

The Canada Winter Games this year and Russian Winter Games in 2014 were smoke free. Other than carrying strong messages for smokers, these two public events embraced high symbolism – and carried lessons for policy makers. Smoking is a heavy burden on the health of the world and its economy, and all possible efforts should go towards curbing this.

The 45-day IPL cricket event was a great occasion for the government as well as other stakeholders to drive home the message on curbing tobacco consumption in India, which is acquiring alarming proportions.

There are similarly many other mega events as well as popular culture tools including cinema and songs which can drive this message, if constructively conceived and executed. Our approach has to turn innovative with use of new tools, designed at preventive intervention, if we have to ensure the menace is adequately addressed. Else time will beat us.

And the data do tell us, we may be getting late - about 1,350 people, on an average, die every day in India due to cancer. According to the data by the Indian Council of Medical Research, a whopping 4,91,598 people died due to cancer in 2014, which was a 6 per cent rise from 2012. Assuming that many of these would be in their productive phase, this is a huge social and economic loss to the nation we can ill afford.

It is rather sad that instead of addressing this dreaded disease, we drag ourselves into avoidable controversies. The recent comments by some members of Parliament that there was no causal relationship between tobacco and cancer were, to say the least, a travesty of truth.

In a paper in a recent issue of the British Medical Journal, British experts Nicholas S Hopkinson, Martin McKee and K Srinath Reddy of the Public Health Foundation of India, say that some governments in Asia were complicit in protecting the interests of the tobacco industry. They said that tobacco industry was reportedly targeting to control policies in India.
Political choice.

The paper said: “The implementation of tobacco control measures is a political choice. Although tobacco control will improve the wellbeing of the populations that governments serve, the industry spares no attempt to deter, dilute, or delay effective measures for tobacco control, be it taxation or prominent pictorial health warnings”.

It added, “There is troubling evidence that the tobacco industry is exerting undue influence in several Asian countries, in some cases with the complicity of governments, to thwart public health measures”.

Little wonder, the matter was put to rest by none less than both prime minister and health minister who asserted the need for larger pictorial warning on cigarette packets.

While public acknowledgements like these by our leaders are good and reinforce the moral argument against

tobacco, the core issue of inducing behavioural changes of those who consume tobacco gets only partially addressed.

Therefore, it is critical that we mull on new, innovative ways of creating a cultural and attitudinal obstructions among the tobacco users. Coupled with strict legislation, this can go a long way in addressing the problem.

What is best, we have piles of medical and empirical proof to bring about this awareness among the tobacco users that its consumption leads to nothing else but destruction and death. It causes destructions in families and cause unbearable pain among those who suffer the scourge of the disease of cancer.

Films and sports are integral to our culture, and day-to-day lives. A reinforcement of the value of no tobacco through these mediums should become a norm.

The Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and Ministry of Culture should kick start a national dialogue along with medical experts and some of our sports and films icons on designing an aggressive campaign on anti-tobacco.

An awareness campaign, with the aim of preventive intervention, is the critical need of the hour. While the medical fraternity has been relentlessly pursuing such a campaign, time has come for others to join in this task to ensure a healthy, smoke-free and tobacco free nation. If we don't do it now, we shall be subjecting the nation to an unprecedented crisis.

(The writer is Medical Director & Chief of Head and Neck Surgical Oncology, Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute & Research Centre, New Delhi)