

Date:

31 August 2006

Subject

Smoking and Obesity - the Terrorism Within

While we worry about the threat of terrorism and bird flu, two more insidious factors are slowly killing more people worldwide than any single terrorist action or epidemic ever could.

According to the World Health Organisation, global annual deaths from smoking are expected to double to 10 million by 2020.

On another front, in the US, the Surgeon-General has warned that obesity has tripled in the past 40 years for children and teenagers - significantly raising the risk of diabetes and disease. He warned that by 2010 more than half of the children on both the North and South American continents will be overweight and he observed that for the first time children are being diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Smoking, poor diet and a lack of physical activity are threats to society unprecedented in the history of man, inasmuch as they represent what demographic historian Abdel Omran once described as "degenerative disease of affluence".

According to some researchers there is even a possibility that the ongoing extension to our life expectancy will, without corrective action, soon start to stagnate or maybe even reverse.

Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable. A recent global youth tobacco survey of 750,000 teenagers in 131 countries reported that almost 9 per cent of students smoked while another 11 per cent used other tobacco products such as chewing tobacco, cigars and water pipes with tobacco.

The time has come for us to take more dramatic corrective action. In fact, it probably came some time ago but better late than never.

Importantly, it's not just for the law makers to fix as they simply won't seize the initiative unless there's broad community support – that's how the democratic system works.

First of all, we need to outlaw and treat tobacco as we do marijuana while providing support and treatment for people to wean themselves of this killer drug. Second, we need to ban the advertising of junk foods (foods with unhealthy levels of fats and sugars relative to other acceptable food components) and their sale in schools.

Third, provide incentives for people to improve their health such as discounts on private health insurance. People shouldn't be penalised in what they pay for health insurance because of health factors they can't control, such as ageing and hereditary problems.

But there's no good reason not to penalise people for choices they make that ultimately burden everyone else.

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Media Release

Yes, I'm dreaming, I know, given the power and influence of those who benefit from tobacco and junk food and the strength of the addiction their labours have created.

But based upon the glaring experience worldwide the stakes have become so high as to set these aspirational goals.

I'm certain in 100 years' time these goals will have been achieved, sadly under the weight of intolerable suffering and death. Why wait?

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