No Tobacco Day 2020 – another ancient ‘COVID DAY’?

Florin Mihălțan¹, Monica Marc^{2,*}

¹National Institute of Pneumology “M.Nasta”, Bucharest, Romania

²University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Victor Babes” Timișoara, Romania

*Corresponding author: Monica Marc

E-mail: stel_marc@yahoo.com

Open Access. © 2020 Mihălțan and Marc, published by Sciendo

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.

Another No Tobacco Day on 31 May 2020 was promoted by the Romanian Society of Pneumology in full pandemic evolution of COVID-19. In 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had a unique message: 'No Secret Protecting youth from industry manipulation and preventing them from tobacco and nicotine use'. Why did they choose this campaign under this logo? Because for decades, the tobacco industry has deliberately employed strategic, aggressive and well-resourced tactics to attract the youth to tobacco and nicotine products (1). Internal industry documents reveal their strategies among which is the attractive new product design to market campaigns like the new 'healthy' products, which have only one objective: to replace the millions of people who died each year from tobacco-attributable diseases with new young consumers. There are some myths emanating from this industry, and we must understand their manipulation tactics. The WHO recommendations (1) are as follow:

- Debunk myths and expose manipulation tactics employed by the tobacco and related industries, particularly marketing tactics targeted at youth, including through the introduction of new and novel products, flavours and other attractive features;
- Equip young people with knowledge about tobacco and related industries' intentions and tactics to hook current and future generations on tobacco and nicotine products;
- Empower influencers (in pop culture, on social media, in the home or in the classroom) to protect and defend youth and catalyse change by engaging them in the fight against Big Tobacco (1). There are a variety of modalities to manipulate the new generations like the World No Tobacco Day 2020 – WHO (1). A few more examples are as below:
 - Using of flavours that are attractive to youth in tobacco and nicotine products, like cherry, bubble gum and cotton candy, which encourage young people to underestimate the related health risks and to start using them;
 - Sleeking designs and attractive products, which can also be easy to carry and are deceptive (e.g. products shaped like a USB stick or candy);
 - Promoting of products as 'reduced harm' or 'cleaner' alternatives to conventional cigarettes in the absence of objective science substantiating these claims;
 - Using celebrity/influencer sponsorships and brand sponsored contests to promote tobacco and nicotine products (e.g. Instagram influencers);
 - Placing point-of-sale marketing at vendor outlets frequented by children, including positioning near

sweets, snacks or soda and providing premiums for vendors to ensure their products are displayed near venues frequented by young people (includes providing marketing materials and display cases to retailers);

- Selling of single stick cigarettes and other tobacco and nicotine products near schools, which makes it cheap and easy for school children to access tobacco and nicotine products;
- Using indirect marketing of tobacco products in movies, TV shows and online streaming shows;
- Placing tobacco vending machines at venues frequented by young people, covered in attractive advertising and pack displays, and undermining regulations on sales to minors;
- Creating litigation to weaken all kinds of tobacco control regulations, including warning labels, display at point of sale and regulations that limit access and marketing to children (specifically, provisions to ban the sale and advertising of tobacco products near schools).

The consequences are visible worldwide and in Romania. There are many 'painful' data concerning tobacco evidences in our country. The latest global study 'Global Youth Tobacco Survey' (2017–2018) (2), where an analysis on tobacco consumption for Romania, implemented on a nationally representative sample of 5,409 children enrolled in grades VI–VIII, aged 13–15 years found that 30.1% of respondents had tried to smoke cigarettes at least once, and 8.6% of respondents had smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days. Smoking in these conditions remains the leading cause of illness in our country; over 36,600 Romanians die annually due to smoking. Also for the other 'health products' promoted by the tobacco industry, there are dangerous effects for Romanian children and youth. Thus, in 2017, the total percentage of students who smoked electronic cigarettes was almost equal to that of those who smoked regular cigarettes (8.2% and 8.6%, respectively). Moreover, several boys stated that they preferred to smoke e-cigarettes compared with regular cigarettes – 10.1% versus 9.8%. Article 13 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, ratified by Romania in 2005, calls for a complete ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, and a study conducted in 23 developed and 30 developing countries showed that banning all forms of tobacco advertising reduces tobacco consumption by 23.5% (3). The Romanian Society of Pneumology organised a webinar on this year's 'No Tobacco Day' and responded with the hope that all these echoes and alarms would be taken into account by the authorities, government and health officials, and that all those

long-awaited legislative changes would remove any source of direct and indirect publicity and promotion, for all tobacco products and e-cigarettes. Romanian lung physicians join the WHO efforts in urging influencers – in pop culture, on social media, in the home or in the classroom – to reach and connect with youth to expose the industries’ manipulative tactics for creating a new generation of tobacco users. Covid-19 is a challenging problem for humanity, but we have not the right to forget this ancient world problem generated by the tobacco

industry with 8 million deaths annually induced by tobacco consumption.

References

1. World No Tobacco Day 2020 – World Health Organization.
2. GATS 2017-2018.
3. Comunicatul SRP de Ziua Mondială Fără Tutun 2020.