

commentary

Characteristics of the antismoking campaign in Serbia and Montenegro

A quarter of a century ago, when it became clear that tobacco use was the leading cause of preventable death, the rigorous antismoking measures were introduced in majority of the developed countries. The authorities in many developing countries, including the former Yugoslavia with its six republics, did not properly recognize the danger of this habit for their citizens and the declared measures to control smoking were rarely put into practice. At that time, the ratio of smoking prevalence rates between general practitioners and entire population of Yugoslavia were only slightly lower than one. For that reason, personal example of physicians could not significantly contribute to smoking prevention in their communities. Fortunately, the need for the antismoking campaign was recognized at the Medical School in Tuzla, and the *Day Without a Cigarette* - January 31st was initiated in 1981 (Igić, R. Doctors and Smoking. *Medicinski Pregled* 2000, 53:117-127). Yugoslav mass media accepted this campaign - especially in four Yugoslav republics, Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia, and Croatia. Soon, medical students at several European countries joined the January 31st campaign and other measures designed to reduce tobacco use. In 1991, the World Health Organization (WHO) welcomed in Geneva a group of 45 students and professors from Tuzla to acknowledge their ten-year leadership of this immense preventive action.

The antismoking activities performed by medical students and various local groups and institutions were the preliminary measure in changing the lifestyle of the society, especially of the young urban population. The campaign gradually increased the pressure to the government to ban advertising and other promotional activities of cigarette manufacturers. The next step was to establish legal regulations and measures of control for banning smoking in hospitals, restaurants, companies, institutions, and public transportation. Some of these measures were successfully conducted in Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia.

The civil war in the former Yugoslavia together with ten-year long economic blockade and the 78-day NATO bombing of Serbia had disastrous consequences. More than hundred thousands of people were killed, the country was disintegrated, and war displaced more than three million people. The Serbs from Croatia have been permanently displaced, and the majority of them together with thousands of refugees from Bosnia now live in Serbia. Half a million of the Kosovo Albanians, the people who live in the Southern part of Serbia, became temporarily refugees, while more than 50,000 Serbs and other non-Albanians still live as the permanent refugees in their own country. Factories, bridges and even some hospitals in Serbia were destroyed. This disaster caused environmental pollution, and had detrimental effects on health and health care system, which once was in very good standing. Soon after the bombing, urgent, efficient, and affordable measures became essential to overcome the health crisis. The battle against smoking was temporarily neglected. In addition, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — as the conducted survey has shown — affected numerous persons in the cities that were heavily bombed, such as Novi Sad, Belgrade, Pančevo, and Niš. Many PTSD-affected persons reported higher cigarette consumption (up to double) and the beginning of smoking habit was much earlier in the bombed areas of the country, especially among the young citizens.

"These findings on PTSD and its influence on smoking are similar to the data published on the increased cigarette consumption by male members of the civilian resistance against Nazi occupation of Holland during World War II or after the explosion at the Murray Federal

Building in Oklahoma City, 1995," says Dr. Stojan Berber, a cardiologist from Sombor. The disorder in Serbia during the events connected to the removal of Slobodan Milošević Government had further negative effect on the antismoking campaign. Smuggling of cigarettes, which for the greater part was carried out via Montenegro went on uninterrupted - the blockade of the country continued. "In 2003, more than one third of population in Serbia, i.e., every second man (48%) and every third woman (33%) were smokers. Even greater is the incidence of smokers among the college students (49%), while in secondary school 40% of students smoke intermittently. "Girls smoke more often than boys," says Nadežda Petrović, an associate of the Batut Institute of Public Health in Belgrade. Thus, despite the immediate problem of the rebuilding of the destroyed country as well as of numerous political, economic, and health problems, the new and agile minister of health in Serbia, Tomica Milosavljević, quickly placed the antismoking campaign on the agenda. In 2003, January 31st was declared as a "National Smoke-out day," and a number of educational measures were supported. For example, education of teachers has been carried out by the "Milan Jovanović Batut" Institute in more than thousand primary schools on the topic how to change the attitudes of students towards smoking. The Institute for the Advancement of Health in Belgrade in cooperation with several other institutions in the country performed similar educational campaign for the students and teachers in majority of the high schools in the country. The national campaign also encourages physicians to promote non-smoking to their patients. According to the preliminary data smoking prevalence rates slightly decreased only among 16-year-old boys.



The antismoking campaign is hindered by cigarette advertisements, promotion of new tobacco products, as well as unrestricted selling of cigarettes to teenagers. Two cigarette factories in Serbia, in Niš and Vranje, were recently bought by the Phillip Morris and BAT, respectively, and two new cigarette factories have just got a license in Vojvodina. Until recently, in Serbia-Montenegro cigarettes were freely advertised (TV, press, billboards,

radio), and they still are sold everywhere - in supermarkets, tobacconists, newspaper stands. Not long ago, the selling of smuggled cigarettes in the streets has been prohibited. The law precludes the selling of cigarettes to persons younger than 18, but this is not observed in practice.



"When in 1990 I visited Moscow with a group of 45 campaigners from the Antismoking Section, we visited The First Moscow Medical School. We wanted to discuss with Russian students the strategies and techniques used in antismoking campaign. We took with us several hundred copies of the book *Smoking and Health* published in Russian by the Medical School in Tuzla. The book was intended for medical students to introduce them to preventive activities. After the lecture, the encounter of Russian students with visitors from Tuzla was announced. However, all Russian students, literally all of them, left brimful auditorium. I asked a few of the leaving students why they did not want to talk to us. The consistent answer was: "Should we give up smoking now that we can get hold of excellent Cool, Winston, Kent, Pall Mall, Dunhill and other cigarettes? You must be mad"- said Miroslav Jerinić, then a medical student and the president of the Antismoking Section, Medical School, Tuzla.

In 2004, director of the Batut Institute Ivanka Gajić said that the goal of the present antismoking campaign in Serbia-Montenegro was to put pressure on the Government to sign and approve ratification of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). "I am sure," says she, "that the implementation of the FCTC will facilitate a strict control over cigarettes, because this convention obligates the signatory-state to challenge the expansion of the tobacco market with tough new regulations on advertising, health warnings, and juvenile smoking. This is why it is important for our country to be found among the signatories of this important document."

The FCTC is so far signed only by Serbia-Montenegro and Slovenia, among the former six Yugoslav republics, and just Slovenia ratified it on April 28, 2005. Ratification is a big obligation for health officials. They must now pressure their colleagues in the finance ministry to prepare laws to implement the FCTC. For antismoking campaigners and all health professionals, this is a big step forward. But they have to be ready for new stroke of the tobac-

co industry that is especially successful in undeveloped and developing countries. It already happened in Serbia-Montenegro with opening two new cigarette factories in Vojvodina. However, the rigid culture traditionally shows strong resistance to changes of the long-lasting habits, and this will be strongest obstacle to the campaigners.



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