

# Assessing Tobacco Control Strategies in Turkey



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*Alan Martin*

[Photo: Gulhan Ceylon interviews teachers in Malatya province.]

It is not a language barrier that hinders Mehmet Arslan from answering the simple question.

"Why do I smoke?" asks the 30-year-old Istanbul hotelier in bewilderment. "I don't know, because my father did, his father did, all my friends smoke."

For Arslan, smoking is a way of life, a habit so popular that nearly 44 % of his fellow Turks do it — one of the highest rates in Europe.

## **Incidence among males**

Among males over 15 years old, the incidence can rise as high as 65 % in some regions, says [Nazmi Bilir](#), Coordinator of Tobacco Control Research at the Ankara-based Hacettepe Public Health Foundation.

Not surprisingly, smoking is a serious public health problem. Conservative estimates place the annual number of smoking related deaths at over 70,000, nearly twice that of Canada.

## **RITC**

With funding from [Research for International Tobacco Control](#) (RITC), an international secretariat housed at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa, Dr Bilir and his colleagues have conducted two surveys on behaviours and attitudes toward smoking since 1996. (Launched by IDRC and Health Canada, RITC also receives financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Its mandate is to assure a strong funding, research, and analysis base for the development of effective public policies for tobacco control in the South.)

The Turkish team's first survey, completed in 1996, was based on 2,500 interviews with teachers, doctors, journalists, politicians, athletes, and students living in the Ankara area. Initial reactions to Law 4027, the anti-smoking legislation passed by the Turkish Parliament that same year, were also

investigated. Law 4027 prohibits tobacco advertising and selling cigarettes to minors, and bans smoking in public buildings and on public transport.

### **National-scale survey**

A second research phase, launched in 1998, extended the survey process to a national scale, with 40 interviewers visiting 34 of Turkey's 858 municipal districts. The survey group was also expanded to include commercial drivers, police officers, and religious leaders. Two sets of cross-sectional surveys, performed one year apart, collected data to monitor changes in the habits and attitudes of the different employment groups. Reaction to the anti-smoking law was also measured in more depth.

Although Dr Bilir and his team are still preparing their report, the preliminary results are encouraging. With the exception of police and commercial drivers (whose overall smoking rates increased by 4 % each to 64 and 74 % respectively between 1998 and 1999), smoking rates have either stayed constant or declined. Support for the smoking ban in public areas is strong. While many children under 18 are still purchasing cigarettes, Turkish storekeepers are making efforts not to sell cigarettes to minors, he says.

### **Smoking decline**

One of the most surprising discoveries was the decline in smoking among children. Among Grade 10 students, for example, the rate fell from 28 % in 1996 to 15 % in 1999. "We regarded it as one of the more promising developments of the research," says Dr Bilir.

Among women — another group actively courted by tobacco companies — only 24 % describe themselves as smokers, roughly the same number as in 1996. The first survey found that working women are more likely to smoke than mothers, most of whom were homemakers. The research pointed to a relationship between gaining social status, economic power, and smoking in women. "The number of women smokers is low when compared with other countries, mostly because in the rural areas it is still not acceptable for them to do it," says Dr Bilir.

### **Media monitoring**

Print and broadcast media were also monitored to analyse how the anti-smoking message was being reported. Dr Bilir says that journalists — who have one of the highest smoking rates (63 %) — prefer to write stories that deal with the health effects of smoking, rather than articles that attack the tobacco industry.

In other results, the researchers found that enforcement of Law 4027 is uneven. Although banned from advertising their product, the tobacco industry skirts the law by announcing price changes in regular news articles. Tobacco companies have also lobbied parliamentarians to allow them to sponsor sporting and cultural events such Formula One racing, so far to no avail.

### **Impact of inflation**

Individuals also flaunt the law because rampant inflation has reduced the maximum fine for infractions from the equivalent of CA\$100 to \$10 since the legislation was first enacted. But Dr Bilir stresses that he prefers to promote the anti-smoking message rather than pursue stiffer penalties.

For example, he argues that punishing a storekeeper who sells cigarettes to an underage boy who is running an errand for his father will only antagonize, not educate, people. "We don't expect to win through punishment, because that will put the 17 million smokers against our cause."

## **Future plans**

Dr Bilir says their results will be used to further publicize the anti-smoking cause, and to recommend ways that the Turkish Parliament can strengthen the existing law. The results will also be shared with the Turkish medical association. "One worrying sign is the low implementation of key aspects of the law in health establishments," he says, noting that several interviewees witnessed medical practitioners smoking inside hospitals.

One of the team's goals is to convince physicians to raise awareness of the dangers of smoking with their patients. "Prevention as a philosophy is not common. So this is one of the things we will want the medical association to implement," he concludes.

*Alan Martin is an Ottawa-based writer who visited Turkey earlier this year. (Photo: A. Martin)*

*If you have any comments about this article, please contact [info@idrc.ca](mailto:info@idrc.ca).*

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## **Links to explore ...**

['It's Rude to Say No': Vietnamese Attitudes Toward Smoking](#), by Keane Shore

[Lessons from Canada's Tobacco War](#), by Lauren Walker

[Smoke & Mirrors: The Canadian Tobacco War](#), by Rob Cunningham

[The Economics of Tobacco Control in South Africa](#), by Mogkadi Pela

[The Global Tobacco War](#), by Michael Smith