



STATEMENT

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DIRECTOR-GENERAL'S MESSAGE FOR WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY 2001

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the World Health Organization

The truth is out—tobacco kills. What you now need to know is that tobacco kills non-smokers as well. Let us be clear about it. Second-hand smoke also kills.

Far from being a mere annoyance or a minor discomfort, exposure to second-hand smoke causes cancer and contributes to various lung and heart diseases. It can cause asthma and other respiratory illnesses in children, and has been implicated in various other childhood diseases such as sudden infant death syndrome or middle-ear infections.

Breathing in second-hand smoke is harmful for everybody, child or adult. Scientists agree that there is no safe level of exposure to second hand smoke. It should simply be avoided. Neither air conditioning nor separation of smoking areas completely clears the air of this significant pollutant. The best protection is not to be exposed to second-hand smoke at all, whether it is within the home or outside it.

However, we are all exposed to second-hand smoke everywhere we go. Many of us are exposed to it all day, every day. Second-hand smoke is found in people's homes, offices, public transport, shopping malls, restaurants, hospitals, stadiums, playgrounds, schools—in any place that people gather to work or play. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 700 million, or almost half, of the world's children are exposed to second-hand smoke. In spite of what science tells us, however, it is considered so acceptable to smoke, and so rude and unaccommodating to protest, that we dare not speak out against second-hand smoke.

The time has come for us to speak out. We have a right to breath clean air. We have a right to good health and to protect our friends and family. We need to clear the air of second-hand smoke.

This World No Tobacco Day 2001 we are calling for a ban on smoking in public places. Such bans offer a comprehensive solution to keep the air clean and safe for all people, both smokers and non-smokers. Bans put the emphasis on people's right to health and help to make smoking the exception rather than the norm. From Canada to Thailand, Australia to South Africa, where ever smoking bans have been put into effect they have also been shown to help people quit smoking.

The wider the bans on smoking in public places, the greater the social unacceptability of tobacco use. Tobacco companies know this all too well and they have feared it for a long time. They will do anything to stop you from taking the dangers of second-hand smoke seriously. They want you, the general public, to feel guilty about standing up for your health. They want you to feel hesitant about protecting your children and family from second-hand smoke.

Big Tobacco has spent millions of dollars trying to convince employers and governments that better ventilation or mere courtesy will solve the problem of second-hand smoke. They have paid for bogus scientific studies, unleashed well-funded campaigns to attack legitimate studies, set up front groups to push for smokers rights, sued health authorities in court, and done everything in their power to delay and defeat meaningful action on second-hand smoke.

No more. We need to clear the air of misinformation about second- hand smoke.

We must take back our right to health and to life. There is no tolerance when it comes to ill-health, disease and death. On this World No Tobacco Day 2001 let us call on our parents, partners, employers and our elected officials to ensure a smoke-free world. Let us pledge to protect ourselves, each other, our children and our families from second-hand smoke.

For further information, journalists can contact Mr Gregory Hartl, WHO Spokesperson, WHO, Geneva. Telephone (+41 22) 791 4458. Fax (+41 22) 791 4858. Email: hartlg@who.int All WHO Press Releases, Fact Sheets and Features as well as other information on this subject can be obtained on Internet on the WHO home page <http://www.who.int/>