Public health: prevention of smoking and initiatives to improve tobacco control

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PURPOSE : to present a proposal of a Council Recommendation on the prevention of smoking and on initiatives to improve tobacco control. CONTENT : to recall, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Directive recasting the existing Community Directive on tobacco product regulation, and introducing several new elements particularly concerning tobacco additives and misleading descriptors, on 5 June 2001. Moreover, the Commission adopted on 14 May 2001, a proposal for a Directive on tobacco advertising and sponsorship which is currently being examined by the European Parliament and the Council under the co-decision procedure. Both these texts have as their objective the improvement of the conditions for the establishment and functioning of the Internal Market and the elimination of obstacles to its smooth operation, taking as a basis a high level of health protection. The present Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation deals with further aspects of tobacco control, which concerns the improvement of public health, the prevention of human illnesses and diseases, and obviating sources of danger to human health. It also takes account of the negotiations for the establishment of a World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, and the need to ensure coherence with other actual or proposed acts. A further element of the proposed Recommendation which complements the measures foreseen in the Commission proposal for a Directive on tobacco advertising and sponsorship is that Member States should evaluate the expenditure by the tobacco industry on the promotion of their products, in order to ensure better monitoring of the application of advertising restrictions and their eventual circumvention. As stated before, the proposal for a Directive on tobacco advertising had to limit its scope to certain types of advertising with cross-border effects. In 1999, a World Bank report concluded that advertising increases cigarette consumption and that legislation banning advertising would reduce consumption provided that it is comprehensive, covering all media and uses of brand names and logos. Such a reduction on cigarette consumption would have immediate short-term and long-terms benefits for public health. In order to be able to evaluate the public health consequences of both Member States and European Community legislation in tobacco advertising as well as of any voluntary restrictions on tobacco advertising, it is important to monitor advertising, sponsorship and similar promotional activities. In fact, such information is needed for future planning of tobacco control activities by both national authorities and the European Community, with the ultimate objective of an improved protection of the European citizens' health. Particular mention should be made of the issue of availability of tobacco products to children and adolescents. This includes the application of age criteria to sales, as well as vending machines sales, self-service sales, distance sales (such sales through the Internet, which should be restricted to sites protected by adult verification methods, using effective mechanisms for identifying the age of the buyers) and sales of cigarettes in packets of less than 20 pieces (in order to avoid lower packet prices, which would make cigarettes more easily accessible for children and adolescents). Furthermore, vending machines should not be used as advertising sites since they are seen indiscriminately by consumers and non-consumers alike. The measures outlined in the proposed Recommendation are entirely in line with the negotiations for the establishment of a World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). In fact, the draft elements of the FCTC presently under discussion include i. a. provisions aiming at a total ban on all forms of direct and indirect advertising, the restriction of access by minors to tobacco vending machines, the prohibitions of the sale of cigarettes individually or in packets of fewer than 20, and the requirement for tobacco companies to disclose expenditures on advertising.