Combating tobacco consumption: Community role

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OBJECTIVE: To set out the possible options for combatting tobacco consumption in the Community, both at Community level and by way of improved cooperation between the Member States.
SUBSTANCE: According to the Commission document, tobacco causes half a million deaths in the Community each year. With 42% of the adult population smoking, the death rate will continue to rise sharply into the next century and smoking will remain the largest single cause of avoidable death in the Community. These figures highlight the need for a targeted and coordinated approach towards combatting smoking in the Community. The Commission therefore sets out a series of options in the document for action at Community level in addition to existing provisions (eg. the "Europe Against Cancer" programme, the directive on the maximum tar yield of cigarettes, etc.). The options for additional actions are: - data collection and epidemiological studies: monitoring tobacco consumption on the basis of the action programme for health monitoring; - children: drawing up a code of practice on the right to a smoke-free environment for children; promoting studies and pilot projects in the framework of existing Community public-health programmes to improve understanding of why young people smoke (schools, general anti-smoking campaign amongst young people); -classification: proposing that nicotine addiction be considered as a dependency, thus allowing it to be tackled under existing programmes; - additives: evaluating toxicity and health consequences arising from additives to tobacco products; - carcinogenic agents: examining the case for a further progressive reduction in the maximum tar content of cigarettes (currently 12 mg.); - consumer information and protection: reviewing the implementation of the labelling directive with a view to evaluating its effectiveness in informing consumers of the dangers of smoking (in particular: considering the definition of the description "light" or "low" tar tobacco products, promoting measures to increase awareness among pregnant women, updating the Council resolution on smoking in public places, encouraging the Member States to increase excise duties on tobacco products and, under the common organization of the market for tobacco, increasing from 1% to 2% the proportion of the premium reserved for the Tobacco Research and Information Fund). At the same time, the Commission proposes a set of options for improving cooperation between the Member States. They are: - protecting non-smokers (children, pregnant women and persons suffering from respiratory diseases), - setting specific targets to reduce the number of smokers in the population, - reinforcing national rules aimed at restricting the sale of tobacco products to adults, - increasing the price of tobacco products in real terms, - providing greater protection for workers exposed to above-normal levels of environmental tobacco smoke, - limiting tobacco sponsorship at sporting or cultural events likely to be televised, - increasing funding of health education measures, - providing smoking cessation medication (eg. nicotine patches, etc.) at minimal or no cost to smokers. The Commission intends to examine the reactions to its options and may present proposals in the light of them. It also intends to present an annual report on the progress achieved in protecting public health from the damaging effects of tobacco consumption. The report will present the Member States with specific options for reducing tobacco consumption.