Combating tobacco consumption: Community role

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In adopting the report by Mr José Luis VALVERDE LOPEZ (EPP, E) on the Commission communication on combating tobacco consumption, Parliament noted that the decline in the number of smokers in the Union was slowing down, that increasing numbers of women were smoking and that young people were smoking from an increasingly early age. It reaffirmed its advocacy of an EU directive governing the direct or indirect advertising of tobacco products and strongly urged the Commission to assess to what extent the use of tobacco was promoted through the Internet. Noting the scientific evidence on dangers related to passive smoking it reaffirmed the right of everyone to breathe clean air, For Parliament this right must always prevail over the right to smoke. It supported measures aimed at banning smoking in the workplace and the drawing up of practical measures to reduce children's and adolescents' exposure to tobacco products such as: - a ban on tobacco vending machines, - a ban on cigarette packaging aimed at young consumers, - setting an age limit of 18 years for the purchase of tobacco products throughout the Community, - increases in the price of tobacco in real terms. Similarly, Parliament called for a harmonization of tobacco tax in the Community. It recommended careful monitoring of the display of nicotine levels on packets and the application of standards governing tar levels for hand-rolling tobacco. The Commission was also asked to draw up a proposal placing the excise tax on hand-rolling tobacco on the same footing as that for cigarettes. It also recommended that any substances added to tobacco should be indicated on the label and should be proven not to have any harmful effects for the smoker. It also called for the setting up of an interinstitutional committee to investigate whether tobacco producers were incorporating substances in tobacco in order to intensify addiction to nicotine. The Commission was asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the warnings on packages of cigarettes before proposing possible modifications to the relevant directives on labelling. In this context Parliament did not support its rapporteur who called for health warnings to cover at least 25% of the surface of the package. Stressing the dissuasive effect of price on tobacco consumption, Parliament urged the Commission to propose a harmonization of duty on tobacco products which provided for a coordinated increase in cigarette prices. It also proposed including a telephone number on packages where callers could be given objective information free of charge on tobacco use and information on smoking cessation programmes. It also called for more complete information on the connection between sudden infant death syndrome and smoking. It stressed the need for information campaigns to change the behaviour of smokers and the implementation of cessation programmes (at low cost or free of charge) and nicotine replacement therapy. It also proposed the establishment of a yearly European Prize for the best anti-tobacco project in the Union and a substantial increase in the financing of anti-tobacco projects within the framework of the 'Europe against cancer' programme. Strongly condemning the Union's export of tobacco of poor quality to third countries, it considered that the Community should not support tobacco-related projects in developing countries. It called for the establishment of a UN Convention on combating tobacco use. It stressed that the health dimension must form part of all policies, including the common agricultural policy. Lastly it called on the Commission to launch a legislative initiative seeking to have nicotine declared an addiction-inducing substance, as is the case in the United States and called for the distribution of nicotine-substitute products. The Commission should help coordinate and support at Community and national level the establishment of an NGO platform to require tobacco companies in the Union to pay compensation for the damage done to smokers. Parliament did not adopt its rapporteur's proposal calling on the Council to end direct income support to the tobacco sector in the Union with a view to releasing appropriations which would facilitate a switch to other crops.