On May 13, 1998, the European Parliament approved a near-total ban on tobacco advertising in the European Union, despite heavy lobbying from the tobacco and advertising industries and significant opposition from certain European countries. The International Union Against Cancer (UICC), funded in part by a grant from the American Cancer Society, played a pivotal role in securing the ban through a variety of activities, including an intensive public awareness campaign aimed primarily at members of Parliament.

The ban, which is the strongest tobacco control measure passed by the European Union to date, prohibits all tobacco advertising on billboards and in newspapers and magazines. In addition, it prohibits tobacco companies from sponsoring sporting events and placing their logos on nontobacco products.

Although the ban was first introduced in 1989 and approved by the European Parliament at first reading in 1992, it was then successfully blocked for nearly 6 years by a coalition of protobacco countries, including Germany, Great Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. However, in the spring of 1997, the coalition lost the support of the British government when the Labor Party gained control of Great Britain’s Parliament. This shift in the coalition opened the way for a positive decision by the Health Council (December 1997), creating an opportunity for the ban to come to the floor of the European Parliament for the second reading. After voting down more than 80 amendments, Parliament passed the directive by a vote of 314 to 211, with 25 abstentions. Although one final procedural hurdle remains, the ban is well on its way to full implementation.

Passage of the ban was a significant achievement for both the UICC and the American Cancer Society. It is one of the most successful tobacco control efforts ever sponsored by the UICC in Europe and an important step for the Society’s international tobacco control efforts. The ban was also a major success for members of the Association of European Cancer Leagues, and a clear demonstration of the power these organizations wield when working together for a common goal.

Initial discussions about promoting the ban took place in August 1997, during the Tenth World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Beijing, China. At that time, representatives from the UICC and the American Cancer Society met to consider likely changes among the European Parliament’s member states and the opportunities these presented. Later that year, in a presentation before the Annual Assembly of European Cancer Leagues, then-President of the Society Myles P. Cunningham, MD, offered to support the UICC’s efforts to pass the ban by contributing one dollar for every two raised by European cancer control organizations.

UICC member organizations raised...
$500,000 in response to the challenge. With this sum and a $250,000 award from the Society, the UICC developed and published a series of rebuttals to the tobacco industry’s arguments against the ban. The rebuttals were specifically designed to educate members of the European Parliament and also served as a resource for tobacco control activists in their efforts to enact the ban. In addition, the UICC was able to sponsor several other important initiatives, including a critical opinion on the legal basis of the ban and direct advocacy efforts in key nations.

The American Cancer Society has had a long-standing commitment to international cancer control efforts and in recent years has increased its efforts on behalf of international tobacco control. As tobacco companies have shifted their focus from domestic to international markets, it has become increasingly necessary to counter their efforts through a wide range of activities. Moreover, with efforts to enact a comprehensive tobacco control policy in the United States well under way, the need to enact similarly tough international policies is growing. Today, tobacco kills approximately 3 million people a year worldwide, and if the current trend continues, tobacco-related deaths could reach 10 million annually.1

The American Cancer Society and its partners in the ENACT (Effective National Action to Control Tobacco) coalition believe that responsible US policy on international tobacco control should include the following:

- An end to US government support of harmful tobacco industry behavior overseas. The federal government should be prohibited from promoting the sale or export of tobacco abroad and from opposing tobacco control laws in other countries. The primacy of health concerns should be clarified by requiring the Secretary of Health and Human Services to certify that a tobacco-related foreign law is not a reasonable protection of public health before the US government may take action to oppose it.
- Significant funding for tobacco control internationally, including support for public education, technical assistance, cessation, and research, with a special focus on developing nations. The magnitude of the problem requires significant funding through several channels, including nongovernmental organizations, federal agencies, and multilateral agencies such as the World Health Organization, World Bank, and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Funding should include strong US government support for international agreements to address tobacco and health issues.

Decisions about funding allocation should be made by leading public health experts based on the best scientific knowledge with maximum flexibility to pursue effective strategies and minimum political interference.

- The retention of the authority of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) over tobacco product exports. The FDA’s limited authority over drug and device exports should not be weakened or eliminated.
- Protection of the legal interests of foreign parties, including the right to sue tobacco companies in US courts. The existing limited right of access of foreign parties to the US court system should not be compromised.
- An end to the smuggling of US tobacco products. Although the United States ensures that other sensitive exports such as firearms and alcohol are not diverted into black markets, comparable efforts are not taken with respect to cigarette exports from the United States. As a result, more than one-fourth of all exported cigarettes end up in the hands of smugglers.2 As the world’s leading cigarette exporter, the United States should apply to tobacco products the provisions that have proved effective in controlling the smuggling of other products, including export permits, product identification...
The Society remains open to additional measures to reduce tobacco use and promote public health internationally.

The advertising ban passed by the European Parliament is an important step in the effort to control tobacco-related disease and death. The American Cancer Society is proud to have contributed to the passage of the ban through its grant to the UICC and looks forward to working with the UICC, the Association of European Cancer Control Leagues, and other organizations to promote tobacco control worldwide.

References
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