

# Smoking Kills!

Cigarette smokers are some of the most loyal customers in the world and it is this loyalty that is killing them by the millions annually.

In pushing the no smoking ban in public places, Health Minister, Hon. Dr. Fenton Ferguson, often points out that “the tobacco industry is the only industry I know that kills its best and most loyal and faithful customers. And so to that extent, that is not something they can deny. You pick up the pack and it says ‘cigarette kills’.” The Minister says that the evidence in relation to the harmful effects of smoking shows that some 6 million persons are dying annually across the globe from cigarette smoking. Of that number 600,000 are dying from passive smoking. He points out that every six seconds someone dies from some kind of tobacco-related illness and that one in 10 adults across the globe dies annually from an illness associated with their tobacco use. He also notes that 50 per cent of the one billion persons, who continue to smoke, will die from some kind of tobacco-related illness. The Minister also explains that 80 per cent of persons affected by tobacco are in low and middle income countries like Jamaica, which spend enormous sums treating non-communicable diseases (NCD), including smoking-related diseases such as cancers, emphysema and heart diseases. In the case of Jamaica, approximately, US\$170 million is spent in the public sector alone to treat NCDs. The smoking habit is not cheap as smokers locally can spend approximately \$250,000 annually to feed their habit, as pointed out by Executive Director of the Heart Foundation of Jamaica, Deborah Chen, as she addressed a JIS Think Tank recently. She notes that smoking negatively affects human development as the financial resources that could be used to fund a person’s growth and development are often channeled towards the habit. If the harmful effect of smoking is so well publicised, why then do persons continue to smoke? General Practitioner and President Elect, Medical Association of Jamaica (MAJ), Dr. Shane Alexis, explains that smoking is a hard habit to break because of its highly addictive nature caused by the presence of nicotine in cigarettes. “The point is that the habit of smoking is an addictive habit and like any other addiction, whether you are addictive to alcohol or narcotics, it is very difficult to break and it is very important to understand that, especially young people, who are thinking of smoking or have just started to fool around with cigarettes. It is very difficult to stop once you have started so the advice is to avoid it all together. Don’t start because it is difficult to stop,” he says. If the person does start however, and wants to quit, Dr. Alexis informs that different approaches to quitting works for different people. He says the management of the addiction will vary according to one’s personality and other health concerns. Dr. Alexis points out that various methods have been used to assist persons in quitting such as psychotherapy, the use of gums and some drugs that assist with the craving for nicotine. “Of course, they are not necessarily foolproof, because once they are gone in a few months, sometimes, the emotional triggers or the power of the addiction wins the battle and the person may start again. So it is a lifelong struggle for many smokers or one time smokers to remain smoke-free or get themselves on track health wise,” Dr. Alexis explains. The General Practitioner also notes that the damage done by the cigarette to the body is permanent and cannot be undone once the person stops. He, however, says it is still better to quit as there are benefits going forward in terms of improving the quality of life. He points out that smoking-related illnesses, such as heart disease and cancer are debilitating. “They really are not just physically very difficult but also emotionally,” he says. Dr. Alexis contends that in the case of a bread winner for the family, the illness can cut into life savings, and argues that with the high cost of health care, especially during these difficult economic times, it can really impact the family and the prospects for the future. The doctor attributes the image that cigarettes are cool as a powerful factor that continues to draw young people to smoke. He notes that while there is not the direct advertising of cigarettes as was once popular in the media, there are still images in the music videos, billboards, movies and other medium that shows smoking as a desirable habit. The 2010 Global Youth Tobacco Survey undertaken by the National Council on Drug Abuse shows that just over 40 per cent of young persons aged 13 to 15 years have smoked at least once, and over 19 per cent of those who have ever smoked started under the age of 10 years. The Government however, is making it more difficult for persons to light up. As of Monday, July 15, a ban on smoking in public places has been in effect. The decision was made by the Minister, who exercised his powers under the Public Health Act, and with the approval of Cabinet. This has resulted in the implementation of the Public Health (Tobacco Control) Regulations 2013. The Regulations outline places where smoking is prohibited, such as all enclosed places, public transportation, workplaces, government buildings, health facilities; sport, athletic and recreational facilities for use by the public; educational institutions; areas specifically for use by children, and places of collective use, such as bus stops. They also require the use of large, graphic health warnings on tobacco products, instead of the text only warnings currently used. This will be effective within six months. The Health Minister said the banning of smoking in public places is part of an overall strategy to reduce NCDs, over time, and to extend mortality and save lives. The Minister noted that based on the evidence from countries that have similar legislation in place, such as Northern Ireland, Canada and parts of the United States, there has been a drop in the number of patients with strokes and heart attacks. Jamaica is the fourth country in the region, behind Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Suriname, to have implemented the ban on smoking in specific public places. Source: JIS