

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

BIG TOBACCO AND MOTO-GP: WHY NO WARNINGS ON THE MOTORCYCLES?

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Tobacco use is one of the most important avoidable causes of neoplastic, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases worldwide and is associated with a high mortality and morbidity¹. Most tobacco-related deaths occur among men, but the female mortality is expected to rise as a result of an increasing smoking habit among girls and women in industrialized countries². Additionally, special concern about the increasing use of tobacco among the most vulnerable populations in developing countries has been expressed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the preamble to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)³, predicting a devastating epidemic in the 21st century.

The fight against smoking is a major target of public health protection programs in Italy. A smoking ban approved in 2003 (article 51 of Law No. 3) and enforced on 10 January 2005 made smoking illegal in all public places including entertainment and work places⁴. The public was significantly compliant with the ban⁵, as confirmed by an objective reduction of the exposure to indoor pollutants⁶ and of hospital admissions for acute myocardial infarction⁷. These findings are in keeping with similar studies carried out in other countries, both for exposure levels⁸ and for cardiovascular and respiratory endpoints^{9,10}.

As far as entertainment is concerned, sports is synonymous with good health and physical and mental well-being and inspires a sense of freedom and enjoy-

ment especially among young people¹¹. However, major sports events give “Big Tobacco” (the nickname often applied to the most important tobacco corporations) the opportunity to launch powerful advertising campaigns in order to attract the attention of millions of people, resulting in huge profits each year (more or less equivalent to the amount of money that governments and institutions spend in the fight against smoke-related diseases).

The most popular sports events in Italy are the soccer championship, involving some 30 million fans; Formula 1 events, with an audience of about 28 million; and, gaining increasing popularity, the world motorcycle championship, involving about 20 million spectators¹².

A few protagonists and champions personally acknowledge the pressure they receive from Big Tobacco to advertise cigarette smoking. In this respect it is interesting to quote the reply of the world motorcycle champion, Valentino Rossi, to the following question of a sports correspondent. “Since the Suzuka 8 Hours Race, you’ve been engaged in a fight against tobacco sponsorship. However, in the last few months you dressed in the colors of Gauloises, Marlboro and Camel. Did you change your mind?” He answered, “No, I am still of the same opinion, but I am a motorcyclist and have to face reality. If the choice is between staying home or racing with a tobacco sponsor, I choose the latter”¹³.

This situation proves that the pressure is continuing despite the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control adopted by the member states of the WHO on 21 May, 2003, in Geneva^{3,14}, with as many as 5 articles establishing rules for sponsorship, advertising and information on this issue:

- art. 9 Regulation of the contents of tobacco products
- art. 10 Regulation of tobacco product disclosures
- art. 11 Packaging and labeling of tobacco products
- art. 12 Education, communication, training and public awareness
- art. 13 Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

Accordingly, as shown in this picture of a tobacconist’s shopwindow in Carloforte (Sardinia, Italy, Au-

gust 2006), cigarette boxes now carry clear warnings. “Protect your children from your smoke” and “Smoke kills”, says the warning on the cigarette boxes on the left and right, respectively. No warning, however, under the Camel logo on the motorcycle.

We believe this is a serious omission in the current advertising regulations and we stress the need for it to be taken into account, in order to avoid that a misleading message is conveyed particularly to the younger generations.

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