

# Life Aflame

*Iftikhar Qayum***ABSTRACT**

Despite many decades of knowledge about the harmful effects of tobacco smoke, smoking still remains a popular habit and addiction among people irrespective of age, gender, social status, or even health consciousness. The preventable and needless toll of lives related to smoking can be likened to slowly putting oneself on fire and thereby gradually succumbing to irreversible and incurable diseases that are regretted only in hindsight. A concerted global effort directed towards a totally tobacco-free world is the only way to proceed with this menace.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*“And it seems to me you lived your life  
Like a candle in the wind”*

The above verse applies as homage to great people, but it can equally depict the life of smokers, albeit at the opposite end of the spectrum. Someone asked quite seriously, “Which end of a cigarette is actually burning?” And the answer was, not only the front end but also the person at the other end. It is perhaps the closest a human can simulate the association of moth and flame, consuming oneself in the flame of desire unthinkingly. A rough estimate puts the global number of lighted “candles” between 5.5–6.0 trillion, lit by approximately 1.2 billion people (942 million men and 175 million women ages 15 or older).<sup>1,2</sup> All this means that the flame is really popular and has a great following of devoted moths.

Though overall estimates indicate that 20% of adults are smokers on the global level,<sup>4</sup> yet the percentages differ markedly from region to region; five countries have a smoking prevalence of 40% or more (Kiribati 47%; Montenegro 46%; Greece 43%; Timor 43%; Nauru 40%); the addition of Indonesia (39%), Russia (39%), Bosnia & Herzegovina (39%), Serbia (39%), and Chile (38%) provides the list of top ten smoking countries.<sup>4</sup> There are also gender differences in smoking rates, so that the overall 20% adults can be broken up into 35% male smokers and 6% female smokers.<sup>4</sup>

One may well ask, “So what if people like to light themselves up?” That is a good question, however, with shocking answers. What appears to be a simple, apparently harmless activity of enjoying a lit up cigarette, is actually a big killer over extended time periods. A long list of smoking-related diseases emerged based on years of research, that

includes pulmonary, cardiovascular, ocular, urinary, dermatologic, metabolic, neoplastic, immunologic, reproductive, and degenerative diseases;<sup>5</sup> most mechanisms of disease are still undiscovered. Long term effects of smoking can be likened to slow poisoning occurring over many decades and damaging most body systems in the process, ultimately leading to states of incurable or irreversible disease processes and multi-organ loss of function. Metaphorically speaking, smokers are slowly smoking themselves out, as if on a barbecue grill!

The fact that cigarette smoke contains thousands of chemicals, including carcinogens and radioactive substances, with the potential for not only addiction, but also serious biochemical, pharmacological, and cellular damage, is usually not known to a smoker. Most smokers adopt the habit by reasons of simple curiosity, having seen others do so, or by persuasion of friends and relatives. In the past, smoking was given a celebrity status through popular movies; movie stars would portray smoking as a glamorous adult activity with rewarding social experiences. The resulting spike in cigarette smoking continued from the 1940s till the 1980s, and only started to decline after extensive and vigorous global campaigns provided public health awareness about the harmful effects of long term smoking.<sup>4</sup> Coincident to this decline in smoking habits were the declining incidences of all diseases that were related to direct or indirect smoke exposure, thereby providing causal linkages at the epidemiologic level.

The fact that tobacco cultivation and taxes on cigarettes yielded tremendous revenues to governments remained a deterrent to a total global ban on smoking for many decades, and it is still a factor in the slow progress towards tobacco control. It appears that the sole efforts of health advocates and physician groups are not enough to counter the menace. The public has to take an active part in boycotting the habit, thereby causing a loss of unhealthy revenues, and a switch to cultivation of healthier foods or fruits by farmers. It is only when public demand will force the hands of governments that they will take proactive roles in tobacco control and banning sales of tobacco products. Despite the efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO) directed at tobacco control policies and measures,<sup>6</sup> it is only global involvement by all nations that will ensure the end of the tobacco era.

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