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Current panorama of tobacco consumption and control measures in Mexico

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Summary This article is aimed to analyze the current situation of the tobacco epidemic in Mexico as well as progress in the struggle against tobacco. Mexico was the first country in the Americas to ratify the framework convention on tobacco control (FCTC). Currently, 36% of men over 18 are smokers and among women there is a prevalence of 13%. Besides this, 26% of the population is exposed to tobacco smoke from other smokers in the home. These figures vary slightly according to the source, and the definition used for smoker. Among adolescents, the initiation of tobacco consumption tends constantly towards an earlier age and no differences exist between men and women. In both cases, 19% had smoked in the month previous to the application of the Global Youth Tobacco Survey and 46% cohabit with other smokers. Among the principal challenges faced is the need to limit the access of minors to tobacco, as 37% of adolescent smokers buy cigarettes in the shops and 62% were not denied the purchase, because they were under age. Mortality attributable to tobacco in Mexico is estimated to be in the tens of thousands. Recently, a conservative estimate calculated that 25,383 deaths occur annually among those over 35 years of age, related to causes attributable to tobacco consumption.

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Introduction

Mexico was the first country in the Americas to ratify the framework convention on tobacco control (FCTC), however many future challenges still exist. The FCTC is the first global treaty by the World Health Assembly, the governing body of the World

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Health Organization (WHO) and is recognized as a landmark achievement for public health advocates. The FCTC provides the international legal structure for nations to combat and limit the danger and harm caused by tobacco products.

In an international context, where tobacco companies invest millions of dollars in the promotion of their product, and use a successful marketing strategy to provide effective doses of the most addictive substance known – nicotine – within each cigarette sold, it is important for any country to analyze their current progress in the struggle against tobacco. The data that are presented in this article show that consumption among adults has changed little in the last 15 years, and that the initiation of tobacco consumption in adolescence occurs at a very young age, with no difference between the sexes. Every year tens of thousands of Mexicans die for reasons attributable to tobacco consumption and the fiscal policy applied to tobacco should be more aggressive. Everything stated here provides good reasons for worrying about this problem and for making the commitment to act decisively concerning the prevention and control of smoking.

Current figures relating to the epidemic

In Mexico, the follow up referring to the tobacco epidemic has been fundamentally achieved using the National Survey of Addictions (Encuesta Nacional de Adicciones, ENA). According to the most recent one applied in 2002, the smoking prevalence is 23.5% in the population between 12 and 65 years of age [1]. This figure is not different from those reported at the end of the 80s and the 90s. The first ENA was applied in 1988. Since then other authors have published in detail methodological aspects of the survey and trends in tobacco consumption [2]. Trends observed in the ENAs, 1988, 1993, 1998, and 2002 do not indicate any significant change in the smoking prevalence. In the three first applications, estimates of the prevalence in urban areas were 25.8%, 25.0%, and 27.7%, respectively [2]. In 2002, 23.5% of the population between 12 and 65 years of age smoke (26.4% in urban areas and 14.3% in rural areas which had not been surveyed in previous years), whilst 17.4% consider themselves ex-smokers [1].

In the ENA, a smoker is defined as any person who reports having smoked in the last 12 months [1]. Using this definition, 36.2% of men and 13.1% of women were considered to be smokers in 2002. Besides this, 25.6% of the population is exposed

to tobacco smoke from other smokers within the home. However this figure is an underestimate of exposure, as it does not take into consideration, that which takes place in public places and at work. On the other hand, an ex-smoker is defined as any person who reports not having smoked in the last 12 months, but smoked at least 100 cigarettes in his/her entire life.

More specifically among the adult population over 18 years of age, 27.0% are smokers. Additionally 19.94% consider themselves to be ex-smokers and 53.1% have never smoked. Stratifying by sex, male smokers represent 42.3%, ex-smokers 27.65% and 30.09% have never smoked. Among women, 15.1% are smokers, 13.9% ex-smokers and 71.0% have never smoked [1].

We also know that the intensity of tobacco consumption in Mexico – expressed as the average number of cigarettes smoked in a day – is low. Most smokers (62.5%) smoke between one and five cigarettes, per day. This pattern does not differ between men (62.8%) and women (61.6%). Also we know that one out of five smokers smoke between 5 and 9 cigarettes every day. In total, 82.5% of smokers consume 10 cigarettes or less per day (men, 82.1% and women, 83.3%). Besides this fact, among those who define themselves as smokers, 47.2% do not smoke daily [1].

Another sufficiently documented aspect [3] refers to regional differences, observing the highest tobacco consumption in the Northern and Central regions, where 28.4% and 27.6% are smokers, respectively, with 16.2% in the South. In urban zones, the prevalence of smokers is greater (26.4%) than in rural areas (14.3%) [1].

The other source of national information is the National Health Survey [4] (Encuesta Nacional de Salud, ENSA) undertaken for the third time in the year 2000, and according to which 21.5% of the population smokes regularly, and had smoked at least 100 cigarettes at the time of the interview. An additional 13.3% had smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their life, even though at the time of the interview they did not smoke. The ENSA also emphasized the fact that almost 80% of smokers and 70% of ex-smokers are men [4].

Referring specifically to the adult population over 20 years of age, the ENSA 2000 data are as follows: male smokers at the time of the survey, 33.7%; with ex-smokers at 20.3%; never smoked at 40.0% and not specified at 6.0%. Concerning women smokers at the time of the survey, 10.1%; with ex-smokers at 6.8%, never smoked at 81.5% and not specified at 1.6% [4].

The differences in the figures from both surveys can be explained taking into account the varying

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