



Smoking out tobacco

TWO YEARS AFTER BANNING PUBLIC smoking in Barbados, could we be moving towards a smoke-free Barbados?

First, we would need to identify what exactly constitutes a smoke-free Barbados. Would it mean no smoking in private areas, including the privacy of your home?

Let's roll back those two-plus years when despite some protests, the Barbados Government imposed a ban on smoking in public places and implemented steep fines or imprisonment – or both – for those found smoking illegally and businesses allowing it.

The legislation was part of Government efforts to curb smoking, which included tax hikes on tobacco, removal of duty-free concessions at ports of entry, and prohibited the sale of

tobacco and tobacco products to minors.

Business operators had to adhere strictly to the no-smoking policy and smokers were forced to step outside when they wanted to light up.

Since then, however, there have been reports that some establishments, including hotels, have been breaking the law. In addition, e-cigarette found their way into the local market. It would seem that a smoke-free Barbados is a pipe dream.

Well, not in the eyes of Professor Trevor Hassell, founding president of the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados and chairman of the Health Caribbean Coalition. He noted that although there were not

yet any specific studies carried out to

determine the effect of the two-year-old legislation that bans smoking in public places, there was anecdotal evidence to suggest a reduction in smoking in Barbados due to the ban.

It is this type of news that keeps him hopeful.

According to Professor Hassell, "A smoke-free Barbados would be one in which all Barbadians recognised that exposure to tobacco smoke is harmful, causing ill health and death due to heart disease, stroke, cancers [and]

lung disease, to name a few – and one in which each and every Barbadian played his or her part in not encouraging or facilitating exposure to tobacco smoke."

In fact, the adjunct professor of medicine at the School of Clinical Medicine and Research at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, and chairman of the National Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) Commission is very passionate that Barbados become a smoke-free country sooner rather than later – and if it has to be done by policy, so be it!

A national policy that identifies Barbados as a smoke free country is desirable and should be articulated without delay.

"Such a policy could include further significant increase in taxes on tobacco products, a ban on tobacco advertisements in all media, large graphic pictorial warning labels on cigarette packages, and greater adherence to the articles of the International treaty known as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), to which Barbados is a signatory," he explained.

It is well noted, documented, recited and repeated that smoking is a major risk factor for serious chronic illnesses like heart diseases, respiratory diseases and certain types of cancers.

Added to this, a study published last November of over one million women who were questioned and monitored by a team of Oxford University researchers showed that those who smoke into middle age had three times the death rate of non-smokers and risked dying at least ten years early.

It went on to say that giving up cigarettes before the age of 40 reduced a woman's risk of smoking-related death by 90 per cent and that quitting by age 30 reduced by 97 per cent. It showed that whether they were men or women, those who stopped smoking before middle age gained an average ten years of life.

The results show that two-thirds of all deaths of smokers in their 50s, 60s and 70s were caused by smoking – not only through

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cancer but other smoking-related illnesses such as heart disease and stroke.

Even those who considered themselves social smokers, having between one and nine cigarettes a day, had twice the death rate of non-smokers. The increased risk remained even after adjusting for the fact that smokers were more likely to live in deprived areas, drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week and avoid strenuous exercise.

So a smoke-free Barbados doesn't sound so bad!

But is that the only alternative?

That leads to the age-old question of a smoke-free campaign versus a harm-reduction drive. Harm reduction means that cigarette smokers who are either unable or unwilling to stop using nicotine products are encouraged to switch to nicotine products with much lower health risk, like the e-cigarette products filtering into the market.

Since our report on the advent of e-cigarettes in Barbados in the **October 2010 BETTER HEALTH**, a new study presented in September 2011 at the European Respiratory Society's Annual Congress in Vienna revealed that despite being marketed as a safer alternative to normal cigarettes, the e-cigarette could cause an immediate increase in airway resistance lasting for ten minutes.

For those who don't know, e-cigarettes are devices that mimic real cigarettes. They deliver nicotine through vapour rather than smoke. This method is thought to be potentially less harmful than smoking tobacco.

More importantly, e-cigarettes are not regulated medicines so the ingredients and amount of nicotine contained within each e-cigarette may vary and really is quite unknown.

It is here that Professor Hassell weighed in with including e-cigarettes in a smoke-free Barbados: "The e-cigarette would be and should be viewed as having the same adverse health effects as cigarettes. Non-smokers should not be encouraged or facilitated to smoke e-cigarettes."



To his credit, there is epidemiological research, although not a lot, which shows that the health benefits associated with switching to such products have been small – perhaps even non-existent.

Health authorities in most countries, including Barbados, have shown very little enthusiasm for new preventive strategies that include switching to tobacco and nicotine products that claim to be less damaging, like e-cigarettes.

In short, the scepticism comes from the uncertainty about what a harm-reduction strategy could lead to at the population level. So that brings us back to our original questions – is a smoke-free Barbados possible? And what would it mean to you and your privacy?

It's still uncertain what it would mean to one's privacy. But what is certain is that on the way to a smoke-free society, we will be left with hard-core smokers that are more and more difficult to influence as their numbers decrease. This is partly because the people in this group, for different reasons, actually want to keep smoking or cannot quit because they are addicted to nicotine.

Smokers are now operating in a very tobacco-hostile climate. The symbolic content is negative, the habit can only be practised in restricted areas, the repeated campaigns will sustain pressure, and the price of smoking will be high.

In other words, society is creating a strong incentive to quit! A smoke-free Barbados is possible.

Such a possibility warrants another question – will a smoke-free Barbados offer the kind of assistance that the remaining smokers need? Puff on that for a while! **BH**