

Tobacco tax a vital public health tool

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We firmly stand behind the government for increasing the tobacco tax. It was long overdue and is a step towards achieving a smoke-free Hong Kong .

In all modern societies, anti-smoking is a public health priority and a 10 per cent increase in the price of cigarettes can effectively reduce consumption by 4 per cent. Even the mainland, the world's biggest producer and consumer of cigarettes, is considering raising the tobacco tax to save lives.

Unfortunately, an argument is being put forward that smokers from the lower income class are unfairly targeted by higher taxes. However, we have to consider the huge health burden - 6,900 lives claimed by tobacco in our community every year and an estimate of medical plus productivity loss amounting to about HK\$5 billion per annum.

Therefore, all smokers, whatever their financial status, should conclude that a tax rise can encourage them to smoke less or stop, thereby improving their health and the health of passive smokers around them.

As doctors, we believe the greatest blessing to the poor is to protect their health. According to the Burden of Lung Disease study commissioned by the Hong Kong Lung Foundation, respiratory disease was the commonest cause of mortality and hospital admissions in Hong Kong in 2005, and smoking-related lung diseases took a heavy toll.

Respiratory tract cancer was the second commonest cause of respiratory mortality (33.2 per cent), followed by chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (17.9 per cent). Tobacco remains the major risk factor for the top five leading causes of death in Hong Kong .

We hear so much about the harmful effects of smoking that it is easy to become blase about this epidemic. In the Western Pacific region alone, cigarette smoking kills two people every minute. In this context, cigarettes should never be set at an affordable price.

A tobacco tax rise is but one of the many measures in our fight against the smoking habit. The government is ushering in new ideas for smoking cessation,

such as keeping clinics open after office hours, an online quit service for teenagers, as well as working in partnership with non-governmental organisations in the fight against this rampant epidemic, all of which we wholeheartedly support.

Legislators have a moral responsibility to get across the right message about the health hazards of tobacco. They have a duty as a collective watchdog to back the government's multi-pronged approach to improve the health of Hong Kong people.

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