

Urging the government to accelerate the enforcement of smoking ban to protect children from the harm of second-hand smoke

Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that smoking is hazardous to health. In order to reduce the number of smokers and minimize the impact of passive smoking on the public, the Hong Kong Government passed the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance in 1982.

However, after over 20 years of campaigning, neither public education nor raised self-awareness of citizens have been able to effectively reduce the number of smokers. According to the Census and Statistics Department, it is estimated that there were approximately 890,000 smokers in Hong Kong in 1982, while the figure in 2006 is still as high as about 800,000. This shows that improvement has been slow and the existing measures against smoking are too mild. Smoking in public areas is still a common phenomenon, which poses a serious threat to public health. Being too young to choose where to go and lacking the opportunity to express opinion, children are often the first to be affected.

There have been medical researches showing that long-term passive smoking predisposes children to asthma or other chronic respiratory illnesses. Therefore, our group proposes the bill of “Urging the government to accelerate the enforcement of smoking ban to protect children from the harms of second-hand smoke”.

Current situation

The bill of Smoking (Public Health) (Amendment) Ordinance submitted by the Government to the Legislative Council has been adopted after three readings on 19 October this year. There are three main points in the bill, including prohibiting smoking from 1 January 2007, in all workplaces, restaurants, schools, beaches, hospitals, outdoor escalators, lifts, and any terminal or station consisting of two or more types of public transportations, or any bus station involving more than one bus route; setting the maximum penalty of smoking in no-smoking areas to \$5,000 from the year of 2008; designating venues unsuitable for people aged under 18 as no-smoking areas from 1 July 2009, including bars, massage centres, mahjong parlours, sauna bathhouses and clubs. Besides, starting from November 2009, tobacco manufacturers are obliged to show health warning graphics on cigarette packages.

There is no doubt that smoking may bring about enormous losses to the public and the Government. In addition, its harm on children is severe and must not be neglected. Several medical reports have pointed out that, if an expectant mother smokes during pregnancy, the foetus will be affected and will weigh less than normal. Besides, it is the main cause for a baby's sudden death syndrome. After birth, the baby may also suffer from congenital defects. Apart from causing heart disease, lung cancer and nasopharyngeal carcinoma, long-term

passive smoking increases the probability for children to suffer from asthma or other chronic respiratory illnesses. It may also affect children's mental capacity, and predispose children to cardiac angiopathy when they grow up.

Moreover, if parents do not set a good example for their children, it will increase the chance for children and teenagers to smoke, which will affect them physically and psychologically in the long term. Surveys show that most smokers get addicted to smoking during puberty. The earlier they begin to smoke, the higher the probability they are to suffer in the future from smoking-related diseases, such as cancer and heart disease. The most severe effects often appear decades later.

There are a number of factors leading to teenager smoking, including promotion campaigns by the tobacco industry, ease of getting tobacco products, low price of tobacco products and peer pressure. Other factors include low self-image and the idea of smoking as normal or trendy behaviour.

In addition, smoking in Hong Kong has resulted in a total economic loss of \$5.3 billion, of which \$1.77 billion is in the loss in productivity and \$3.56 billion in the expenditure on direct medical treatment and long-term nursing. However, the Hong Kong Government receives only \$2.5 billion tax income from tobacco. Thus, smoking constitutes a heavy burden on local economy and taxpayers.

From the aforementioned information, it is clear that measures against smoking in

Hong Kong are definitely insufficient. Children are still affected by passive smoking. If this situation continues, it will only redouble the financial burden on the Government and harm the public. Therefore, our group has proposed the following suggestions, in the hope of further alleviating the harm of passive smoking on the public, especially children.

Suggestions

Publicity

In order to protect the public from the harm of second-hand smoke, the designated smoke-free areas in Hong Kong have already been extended through legislation. However, designating more areas as smoke-free areas may make parents opt to smoke at home. The harm on children is then even greater and more far-reaching. Thus, our group has come to the consent that it is necessary to educate parents not to smoke at home.

Since we cannot force parents to stop smoking at home, we ought to educate them, so as to let them understand the harm of second-hand smoke and its impact on children. Communities and schools can hold family activities to let parents learn how children think about passive smoking from their point of view.

Mass media is also influential. The Government should step up publicity about the

harmfulness of passive smoking on children through television and the Internet, etc. Influenced by these means in subtle ways, parents will learn about the harmfulness of second-hand smoke. Our group believes that all parents do care about their children, and that they never want their children to be hurt. Therefore, after knowing the harmfulness of second-hand smoke to children, parents will definitely smoke less at home!

Smoking Cessation Backup Services

In addition, the Government has to strengthen the backup services for smoking cessation. There are currently four cessation clinics under the Government that provides nicotine replacement therapy for smokers. However, the locations of these clinics are not good enough, which may hinder smokers' determination to quit smoking. Our group suggests that the Government strengthen smoking cessation backup services and provide more clinical services specially designed for smokers. We believe that giving up smoking not only needs determination of the smokers, but also assistance from the Government through smoking cessation backup services.

School Education

At present, publicity against smoking is extremely inadequate in Hong Kong kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools. Although children can get the basic message against smoking, having been influenced by adults and peers for a long time, they tend to neglect their health by accepting or even welcoming people to smoke. We think that schools should step up publicity efforts, for example, by setting up anti-smoking groups, organizing activities such as slogan creation and debate competitions, and appointing students as smoke-free ambassadors. Through participation and peer education, children will keep in mind the harm smoking brings to the public.

We also think that issues related to smoking and health should be incorporated into the Liberal Studies subjects in secondary schools, so as to make known the consequences of passive smoking, and let children know that smoking is not as ‘cool’ as it claims, and that it is important to say “No!” to smoking. Furthermore, we hope that children can bring back home the information acquired at school, and encourage smokers in the family to quit smoking.

Extending Designated Smoke-free Areas

According to the recently passed ordinance, many places will be designated as non-smoking areas step by step in the future. However, we do not think that it is enough. The

Government should further prohibit smoking in places which children and teenagers frequent, for example, theme parks (Disneyland and Ocean Park), and areas of the entire park, playground or field, and barbecue sites. These are places for children and teenagers to play and have fun. We should provide them with a healthy and smoke-free environment to grow up in.

Total Smoke-Ban Timetable

Although our group hopes that Hong Kong will eventually become a smoke-free city, we understand that a total smoke-ban cannot be achieved in the short run. However, we do not want to wait for this day endlessly. Hence, we suggest that the Government set a total smoke-ban timetable. With this, the enforcement of the smoke-ban can hopefully be achieved gradually. Furthermore, citizens have the right to know what is happening in society. Therefore, the smoke-ban timetable must be open to the public, so as to increase citizens' confidence in the Government, and unify people from all walks of life to fight against smoking.

Conclusion

Health is the basis for success, and children are pillars of future society. However, having been influenced by adults and peers for a long time, there is usually a greater chance for children to smoke, which will seriously affect their physical and psychological well-being in the long term. Besides, smoking brings about enormous economic losses on the public and the Government, and passive smoking is hazardous to children's health and psychology as well. Thus, we must urge the Government to do the following: Step up publicity about the harmfulness of passive smoking; improve the backup services for smoking cessation; incorporate issues of smoking and health into the Liberal Studies subjects in secondary schools; set up anti-smoking groups in schools; designate all parks, theme parks and barbecue sites as non-smoking areas; and work out a timetable for imposing a total smoke-ban, so as to reduce children's exposure to second-hand smoke. Therefore, I, on behalf of the 15 children councillors of our group, propose passing the bill of "Urging the Government to accelerate the enforcement of smoking ban to protect children from the harms of second-hand smoke".

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- Dr. Homer Tso Wei-kwok, Chairman of the Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health

- LegCo Member Andrew Cheng Kar-foo, Chairperson of Bills Committee on Smoking

(Public Health)(Amendment) Bill 2005

- All interviewed children and public figures