

WBB/BATA/PATH Canada/CIDA MASS MEDIA SURVEY REPORT January 2002

I. Introduction

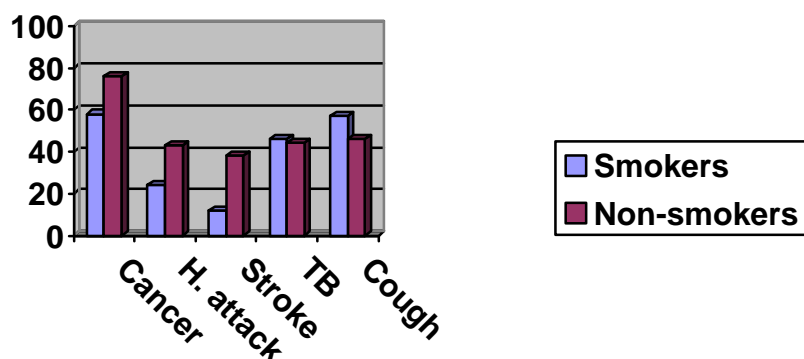
In late December 2001, Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB), the Bangladesh Anti-Tobacco Alliance (BATA), and PATH Canada carried out a mass media survey as part of its joint project on tobacco control, funded by the Government of Canada through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The purpose of the survey was to provide a baseline for comparison purposes to test the effectiveness of its mass media program, as well as to select appropriate messages for use in the mass media program. The survey was also used to measure levels of public support for tobacco control.

II. Survey results

The survey was conducted among 500 people total, of whom 87% were male and 13% female. The survey was conducted in Dhaka, Comilla, Khulna, Sylhet, Narayanganj, and Borishal. Of the total respondents, 65% were smokers and the remaining 35% non-smokers. Only in Comilla were more non-smokers than smokers surveyed.

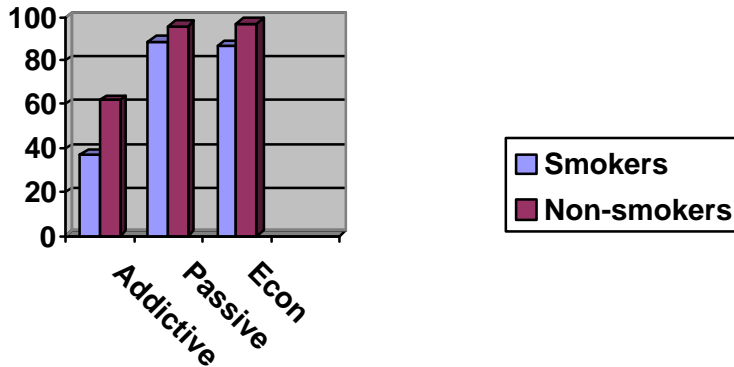
There was a high level of awareness that smoking harms the health among the respondents—98% of both males and females, 97% of smokers, and 100% of non-smokers. However, the awareness of different diseases caused by smoking was much lower. When asked to mention diseases caused by smoking, the most commonly mentioned was cancer, for a total of 65% of participants. However, only 58% of smokers, as opposed to 76% of non-smokers, mentioned cancer. The other most commonly-mentioned ailments mentioned by smokers were cough (57%), difficulty breathing (51%), and tuberculosis (46%). Significant differences in knowledge between smokers and non-smokers existed in different areas, with the largest being in mention of heart attack (43% of non-smokers as opposed to 24% of smokers) and stroke (38% of non-smokers versus only 12% of smokers).

Knowledge of diseases caused by tobacco



Awareness that smoking harms the economy was higher in non-smokers (97%) than in smokers (87%), as was knowledge that passive smoking is harmful (96% of non-smokers versus 89% of smokers). An even bigger difference occurred in knowledge that smoking is addictive, with 63% of non-smokers and only 37% of smokers saying that smoking is addictive.

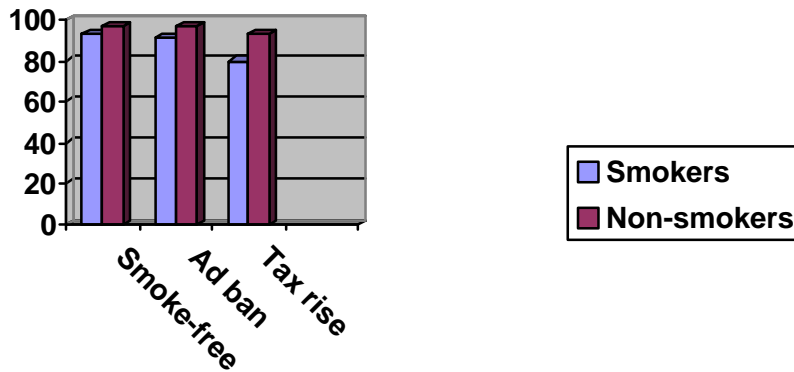
Awareness of other problems



In addition to knowledge of the harmful effects of smoking, we also asked about their attitude towards different tobacco control measures. The results were strikingly positive, with the vast majority of both smokers and non-smokers favoring tobacco control policies. The lowest level of support was for a tax increase on tobacco products, but even there, 80% of smokers and 93% of non-smokers supported an increase. It is hard to imagine any other product on the market that would receive such strong support for a tax increase among both users and non-users alike!

Support was even stronger for the other two policies mentioned in the survey. Almost all non-smokers (97%) supported a ban on tobacco advertising and more places being made non-smoking; the figures for smokers were 91% for an ad ban and 93% for smoke-free places. Clearly, the Government of Bangladesh could successfully pass laws to ban tobacco ads and make many more areas smoke-free, and thereby gain tremendous public support.

Support for tobacco control



III. Discussion/Conclusion

A. Warnings on cigarette packs and ads

In Bangladesh, cigarette packs and many ads contain the warning “Smoking is deleterious to health”. However, this survey makes it evident that the warning is no longer useful. Virtually all the respondents are aware that smoking harms the health, but when it came to specific diseases and health problems, their knowledge was far lower. Clearly, warnings on tobacco products need to mention specific diseases.

The most efficient way to reach smokers is by putting messages on tobacco products. By using rotating, preferably picture-based messages (such as are used in Brazil and Canada), the government could reach all tobacco users at no cost to itself. But the messages need to be specific, and address the areas in which smokers are not informed. Specific messages could include “smoking kills”, “smoking causes heart disease”, “smoking causes stroke”, and

B. Need for public education

The fact that smokers are less informed about the serious illnesses caused by smoking than non-smokers suggests that greater public education could decrease tobacco use. As mentioned above, the information needs to be specific. Everyone knows that smoking harms the health; people need to understand what diseases smoking causes, how likely they are to get those diseases, and that tobacco is, like heroine and cocaine, an addictive drug.

However, the fact that almost 60% of smokers are aware that smoking causes cancer indicates the fact that public education alone is not enough to keep people from smoking. Raising the level of knowledge of different health effects can decrease the attractiveness of smoking, but it is difficult to compete with the attractiveness of tobacco ads. By banning all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion, by making more places smoke-free, and by raising tobacco taxes, rates of smoking would decline considerably, with great resultant benefits to public health.

C. Support for tobacco control law

The vast majority of both smokers and non-smokers surveyed support a ban on tobacco ads, more places being made smoke-free, and tax increases on tobacco products. With such strong

support for tobacco control law, the only opponents would be the tobacco companies. While tobacco companies are quite vocal, their opinions should not outweigh those of the majority of the population. Nor should business considerations outweigh those of public health. In the case of tobacco control law, a rare and enviable win-win situation exists: the government can act to protect public health while also gaining great public support. As previous collaborative research by WBB, BATA, and PATH Canada has shown, another consequence of great import would also occur: as the poor (who have the highest rates of tobacco use in Bangladesh) spend less on tobacco and more on food, an anticipated 10.5 million fewer children would go hungry.