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More reasons to ban smoking

This week, PASSIVE smoking is even more harmful than previously thought, according to a series of studies released last week. Their publication coincided with the British government's introduction of its watered-down and much-maligned health improvement Bill, which failed to commit to a complete ban on smoking in pubs, bars and restaurants in England.

The bill will see smoking banned in workplaces, including pubs and restaurants, in England by summer 2007, but not in private clubs and bars that don't serve food. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, by contrast, are planning to prohibit smoking in all public places.

"There is more and more evidence that there is a need for a ban," says Vivienne Nathanson, the British Medical Association's head of science and ethics. It's not just the 54 UK bar workers who die from the effects of second-hand smoke each year that we should bear in mind, she says. "There's a significant impact on a much larger group of people. It's a lost opportunity."

A study of adolescents in Massachusetts by Michael Siegel from Boston University School of Public Health and his colleagues found that those from towns with strict smoking regulations were only half as likely to become established smokers as those from towns with lax regulations. "They make a very reasonable case that total bans denormalise smoking as an adult behaviour," says Robert West, director of tobacco studies at Cancer Research UK.

Geoffrey Fong, a psychologist from the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, and his team found that many of the arguments used against imposing a total ban were unfounded. They showed that compliance with the ban implemented in Ireland in March 2004 was high, support for it was also high, and that nearly half of smokers said it had made them more likely to quit.

One prominent critic of prohibition, UK Secretary of State for Defence John Reid, has argued that if people can't smoke in pubs, they are more likely to smoke at home, and thus the impact on children will be greater. But West dismisses this view as "utter rubbish". After the Ireland ban, fewer people were smoking at home, too, he says.

A surprising new finding is that second-hand smoke even has a detrimental effect on smokers. Using questionnaires to probe the respiratory health of nearly 10,000 members of the Hong Kong police force, including 4000 smokers, Lai-Ming Ho from the University of Hong Kong's Department of Community Medicine says his team found very strong effects of passive smoking on the health of smokers. We found a dose-response effect, with respiratory symptoms such as cough, phlegm, wheezing and runny nose," he says. The studies appear in the journal Tobacco Control.

PHOTO (COLOR): Old habits don't always die hard

By Helen Phillips

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"There is more and more evidence that there is a need for a ban," says Vivienne Nathanson, the British Medical Association's head of science and ethics. "It's not just the 34 UK bar workers who die from the effects of second-hand smoke each year that we should bear in mind. She says, 'There's a significant impact on a much larger group of people. It's a lost opportunity.'

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The bill will see smoking banned in workplaces, including pubs and restaurants, in England by summer 2007, but not in private clubs and bars that don't serve food. The authors found that those from towns with strict smoking regulations were only half as likely to become established smokers as those from towns with lax regulations. "There is a significant impact on a much larger group of people, it's not an opportunity," says Robert West, director of tobacco studies at Cancer Research UK.

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The bill will see smoking banned in workplaces, including pubs and restaurants by summer 2007, but not in private clubs and bars that don't serve food, or in pubs in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scotland and Wales, by contrast, are planning to prohibit smoking in all public places.

"There is more and more evidence that there is a need for a ban," says Professor David Scharf, the British Medical Association's head of science and ethics. "The 54% of UK bar workers who die from the effects of second-hand smoke each year is probably an underestimate. It should be a shock to the system."

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