

# Role of Members of University Students' Unions in tobacco prevention

M.F. ALLAM<sup>\* \*\*</sup>, K.M. ABD ELAZIZ<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Department of Community, Environmental and Occupational Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt;

<sup>\*\*</sup> Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Cordoba, Cordoba, Spain

## Key words

Cigarette • Shisha • Smoking

## Summary

**Introduction.** In Egypt, each faculty has its own students' union, which represents the students and collaborates in organizing all educational, sporting and social activities. The objectives of the current study were to evaluate the knowledge of members of students' unions about cigarette and Shisha smoking together with assessing their attitudes towards smoking in public places in general and in the university.

**Methodology.** A random sample of members of Ain Shams University Students' Unions was subjected to an interview questionnaire. All participants were individually interviewed face-to-face by a trained interviewer from March 1, 2005 to April 30, 2005.

**Results.** Our study showed that 34 (31.5%) students were smokers. The mean knowledge score percentage was  $79.4 \pm 20.7$ .

Regarding knowledge about Shisha smoking hazards, the majority of the students (84.3%) knew that Shisha smoking is hazardous. The mean attitude score percentage was  $56.8 \pm 22.2$ . Smokers had less mean knowledge as regard smoking hazards compared to non-smokers ( $p < 0.01$ ). Also, smokers had a lower mean attitude compared to non-smokers ( $p < 0.001$ ). More than one-third (38.9%) of the interviewed students didn't know if the students' union has a policy for prevention of smoking or not.

**Conclusion.** Our findings point that although our students had a moderately high mean knowledge score yet this didn't increase their attitude about the smoking problem in the university and in the community. This supports the notion that, in addition to knowledge about smoking hazards, efforts are needed to change beliefs that allow this offensive habit to continue.

## Background

Tobacco is a silent epidemic and remains a major killer particularly in developing countries. If current patterns continue, tobacco use will result in the death of 520 millions adults in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [1].

The World Health Organization (WHO) has categorized smoking as an addictive behaviour, which usually starts at early adult life. Thus, smoking addiction affects mainly the productive sector of the population [2]. Despite decades of prevention efforts, rates of the adolescent smoking remain unacceptably high [3, 4].

Several studies have demonstrated that it is more difficult to quit smoking if the smoker starts at early adult life [4]. Furthermore the health damage of tobacco can be reduced if the smokers are assisted to stop and if young people are discouraged from starting to smoke [5].

The overall prevalence rate of smoking in Egyptian youth is 19.6%; male youth 22.8% and female youth 15.8%. This study defined youth as the time of life when one is young; especially the early period of existence, growth, or development, between childhood and maturity. These persons are falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive [6]. Despite this high prevalence there is no known national tobacco control education program [7].

In Egypt, each faculty has its own students' union, which represents the students and collaborates in organizing all educational, sporting and social activities. However, the role of members of university students' unions in tobacco prevention is not known. It is assumed that they should participate in maintaining the university as a smoke free-area and collaborate in all smoking campaigns. Moreover, they should be models for other students in non-smoking.

The objectives of the current study were:

1. Evaluate the knowledge of members of students' unions about cigarette and Shisha smoking;
2. Assess the attitude of members of students' unions towards smoking in public places in general and in the university;
3. Measure the smoking habits of members of students' unions;
4. Be acquainted with the suggestions of members of students' unions regarding tobacco prevention inside and outside the university.

## Methods

A random sample of members of Ain Shams University Students' Unions (ASU-SU) was subjected to an interview questionnaire. All participants were males

and individually interviewed face-to-face by a trained interviewer from March 1, 2005 to April 30, 2005.

No females participated in the study. In Egypt, university students who volunteer and take part of students' unions are usually males. Although female students participate in most of university's social activities they rarely present to form part of the students' unions. Interviews were conducted in Arabic using a 25-item questionnaire, in order to obtain information on members' knowledge, opinions and attitudes toward smoking. To our knowledge, there is no other study that evaluated the role of members of university students' unions in tobacco prevention. Our questionnaire was formulated according to our objectives and was tested on 5 members of ASU-SU before its use. Pilot study was of help in formulating and structuring the questions in slang Arabic language.

The knowledge questions targeted three main domains. The first domain questioned the hazards of smoking on infants, pregnant females and adults. The second domain targeted the knowledge about the hazards of Shisha smoking. The third domain, and the most important, was the knowledge of the ASU-SU members about fatwa (Islamic religious ruling) against smoking and the rules against prohibition of smoking in the educational institutes. The knowledge section included 9 questions. Each question with a correct answer was given a score of 1 (total knowledge score of 9). The total score for each student was divided by 9 to calculate the percentage of knowledge for each student.

The attitude section questioned the role of the interviewed student as regard advising others to stop smoking, informing smoker students about the hazards of tobacco smoking. Also, the attitude questions emphasized the role of the student in his family as regard fighting of smoking, possibility of quitting smoking and asking smokers to throw cigarettes in his presence. The attitude section included 14 questions. Each positive attitude answer to the attitude questions was given a score of 1. The total attitude score for each student was divided by 14 to get the percentage of attitude.

All questioned students were asked about their smoking habit and thereafter comparisons were done between smokers and non smokers regarding the knowledge and attitude scores.

The study included also questions about the presence of any policy for combating smoking among students in the students' unions.

Finally, the interviewed students had to answer 3 open-end questions about:

- Possible role of member of ASU-SU in tobacco prevention;
- Suggestions to combat smoking inside and outside ASU;
- Participation in previous activities against smoking in ASU.

## Statistical methods

First, the following descriptive analysis was done: frequency, percent, mean, standard deviation. Thereafter, student's t-test was used to compare the mean knowledge and attitude scores in smokers and non smoker students. Level of significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . All data variables were encoded and computerized. Data entry and statistical analysis were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 11.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois).

## Results

This study included 108 members of Students' Unions at Ain Shams University (Cairo, Egypt). They were all males and randomly selected from different faculties of Ain Shams University.

Our study showed that 34 (31.5%) students were smokers. The mean duration of smoking in these students was  $3.8 \pm 2.5$  years. Among the smoking students 15 (44.1%) believed that quitting smoking is not possible at all. We could not analyze gender role as all partici-

**Tab. I.** Knowledge of students as regard hazards of smoking and rules that prohibit smoking.

Item	No.	%
Smoking is hazardous to pregnant females	104	96.3
Smoking is hazardous to infants	103	95.4
Smoking causes cancer in adults	99	91.7
Smoking brings early senility	82	75.9
Shisha smoking is hazardous	91	84.3
Shisha smoking more hazardous than cigarettes	60	55.6
Fatwa (religious rule) for prohibition of smoking	87	80.6
Rule for prohibition of smoking in public places	65	60.2
Rule for prohibition of selling cigarettes to minors	81	75.0
Mean knowledge score (Mean $\pm$ SD)	7.1 $\pm$ 1.8	
Mean knowledge score % (Mean $\pm$ SD)	79.4 $\pm$ 20.7	

**Tab. II.** Attitude of students as regard smoking (magnitude of the problem, advising others to quit, health education, activities against).

Item	No.	%
Smoking should be considered as a public health problem	101	93.5
Smoking should be considered as a national public health problem	85	78.5
It should be emphasized that smoking is unlawful in Islam	85	78.7
Smokers should be informed about possibility to quit	83	76.9
No intention to smoke after one year	83	76.9
No intention to smoke after 5 years	78	72.2
Ask somebody beside you to throw his cigarette	48	44.4
Advice other friends to quit smoking	62	57.4
Advice a smoker member of your family to quit	55	50.9
Ask a smoker member of your family not to smoke in your presence	50	46.3
Teach smoker students the hazards of smoking	41	38.0
Teach students about hazards of passive smoking and rights of non smokers	55	50.9
Need more information on smoking	33	30.6
Participated in activities against smoking	1	0.9
Mean attitude score (Mean $\pm$ SD)	7.9 $\pm$ 3.1	
Mean attitude score % (Mean $\pm$ SD)	56.8 $\pm$ 22.2	

pants were males, also gender role is out of scope of the current study.

Table I shows that the mean knowledge score percent-age was  $79.4 \pm 20.7$ .

Regarding knowledge about Shisha smoking hazards, the majority of the students (84.3%) knew that Shisha smoking is hazardous. However, only 60 (55.6%) of the students knew that Shisha smoking is more hazardous than cigarette smoking.

Knowledge of Fatwa ruling on smoking was found to be high (80.6%). Meanwhile, knowledge of members of student's union about prohibition of selling to minors was less (75%), together with the prohibition of smoking in public places (60.2%).

Table II shows attitude of students as regard smoking. Table III denotes that smokers had less mean knowl-edge as regard smoking compared to non-smokers and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Also, smokers had a lower mean attitude compared to non-smokers and again this difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Table IV shows that 38.9% of the interviewed students didn't know if the students' union has a policy for prevention of smoking or not. Also, 85.2% of them af-firmed that they have no role in prevention of smoking as a member of the students' union.

Table V shows the results of the open questions about the three main items.

## Discussion

Young adulthood is the most critical period for the ini-tiation of smoking behavior and the majority of young adults become regular smokers after the age of 18. Previous studies have shown dramatic increase in the proportion and intensity of smoking after high school age [8]. This calls for focused attention on tobacco pre-vention and cessation for young adults. One of the main recommendations of the WHO for developing countries is to focus on young people in tobacco banning activi-ties to attain the millennium development goals [5].

**Tab. III.** Comparison between smokers and non-smokers students as regard the mean knowledge and attitude towards smo-king.

	Mean	SD	t	P
Knowledge				
Smokers N = 34	70.2	24.4	3.2	0.002
Non smokers N = 74	83.6	17.4		
Attitude				
Smokers N = 34	35.5	16.0	8.9	0.000
Non smokers N = 74	66.6	18.7		
p < 0.01 Highly significant				

**Tab. IV.** Knowledge of members of students' union about the union policy towards smoking and if it plays a role to stop smoking.

Item	No.	%
<b>Students union policy towards smoking</b>		
Smoking is permitted	18	16,7
Smoking is not permitted	30	27,8
Has no policy	18	16,7
Don't know	42	38,9
<b>Students union plays a role to stop smoking</b>		
Yes	16	14,8
No	92	85,2

**Tab. V.** The results of the open-end questions were summarized in main items.

**A. Possible role of member of ASU-SU in tobacco prevention**

1. Participate in activities, like seminars and conferences, aiming at improving.
2. Knowledge and attitude about hazards of smoking and advantages of early quitting.
3. Placing signs and posters about hazards of smoking.
4. Participate in applying penalties on smokers inside ASU.

**B. Suggestions to combat smoking outside ASU**

1. Increase price of cigarette smoking and taxes on tobacco industry.
2. Organizing seminars to explain hazards of smoking.
3. Organizing TV, radio and press campaigns against smoking.
4. Expand the religious guidance against all types of smoking
5. Strict application of law against selling cigarettes for adolescents <18 years of age.

**C. Suggestions to combat smoking inside ASU**

1. Encourage sporting activities, especially inside the university.
2. Prohibition of cigarette selling inside the university.
3. Organizing extensive campaigns against smoking inside the halls and closed areas of the university.
4. Application of immediate penalties on smoking in the university.

Prevention and cessation programmes also need to address other tobacco products, like Shisha smoking, in addition to cigarettes [9].

Of no doubt, macro level approaches are effective in reducing the prevalence of tobacco use among adolescents. These approaches include counter marketing campaigns, increased tobacco taxation and stronger tobacco control. All have shown to be successful strategies for preventing and reducing youth tobacco use [10]. However, micro levels interventions, such as school based social influences programmes, and community based and local media programming seems to be potentially effective methods of reducing tobacco use initiation [8, 9].

Our study showed that nearly one-third (31.5%) of students' unions members were smokers. This result denotes a very high percentage of smoking among the role models for other students that need to learn that smoking is hazardous to self and others. It is of note that this high level of smoking prevalence is more or less equals (40%) to the prevalence rate of smoking among Egyptian males estimated in 2001 [11].

In general, the interviewed students' members unions had a high knowledge scores (mean knowledge score % >75%). This implicates that the interviewed students know the hazards of smoking but this didn't prevent one-third of them from smoking.

It is obvious from our results that most of the interviewed students considered Shisha smoking is hazardous but less hazardous than cigarette smoking. This misconception calls for conducting health education programs about hazards of tobacco smoking especially Shisha smoking. The current less orientation of the hazards of Shisha smoking would be a drive for the students to smoke Shisha on cafes and public places.

Interviewed students were aware with the Fatwa (religious rule) for prohibition of smoking. However, about 40% of interviewed students did not consider smoking in public places, like coffee shop or faculty halls, as illegal act. This denotes that the legal implication of prohibition of smoking is not well known to the members of students' unions. Also, one-fourth of the members of students' unions were not aware with the legal prohibition of selling cigarettes to minors.

Smoking is clearly a harmful habit, especially for young adults that must be stopped. Given that most of the interviewed students questioned about smoking were aware of its hazards and legalizations against smoking in public places including the university halls gives hope for its real prohibition. The results of this study confirm that education may play an important role in shaping peoples' beliefs about the offensive effects and impacts of smoking and could help induce change both in Egypt and other countries where smoking is widely practiced.

Regarding the students' attitude, it is noted from our results that the mean attitude score is lower than the knowledge score. This finding points that although our students had a moderately high mean knowledge score yet this didn't increase their attitude towards the smoking problem in the university and in the community.

The general and personal attitudes towards smoking were more or less fair. In contrary, we noticed low attitude regarding advising or asking friends or relatives to throw their cigarettes, not to smoke in his presence or to quit smoking.

This supports the notion that, in addition to knowledge about smoking hazards, efforts are needed to change beliefs that allow this offensive habit to continue.

It is of note that only 38% of the interviewed students believed that it was necessary to teach smoker students about the hazards of smoking. In concordance, only 50.9% of the interviewed students were ready to collaborate in teaching the university students about hazards of passive smoking and rights of non smokers.

It was surprising that only 30.6% of the interviewed students reported that they were in need for more information about smoking, especially that only 0.9% of them previously participated in activities against smoking.

Our results prove that knowledge about and attitude towards smoking influence in its practice. Smoker stu-

dents had poorer knowledge and attitude regarding the hazard of smoking compared with non smoker interviewed students.

It is clear that there no known policy of the student's unions towards smoking. The answers of the interviewed student showed clearly the inconsistency regarding their knowledge about any policy. It is of note and disappointing that more than one-fourth (27.8%) of the questioned students believed that smoking is permitted. Also, more than 85% of the questioned students admitted that they play no role to stop smoking.

In conclusion our results call for:

1. Raise awareness and positive attitude of students towards hazards of smoking and prohibition of smoking in universities;
2. Establish rules in universities to prevent entry of smoker students in students' union in order to have positive role models against smoking in this group;
3. Organize courses for member of student's unions to convey the message of hazards of smoking to all students and should be involved in activities against smoking in their universities. Also this course should manifest the roles of these students as role models and the policy of the university students' union towards smoking;
4. Raise students' awareness as regards the legal application of rules preventing smoking inside universities;
5. Carry out anti smoking campaigns in some universities to raise awareness and attitude of students about hazards of smoking, the role models of non smokers and hazards of Shisha smoking.

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■ Correspondence: Dr Mohamed Farouk Allam, Department of Community, Environmental and Occupational Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Abbassia 11566, Cairo, Egypt - Tel. +202 2 6 853 276 - Fax +202 2 4 837 888 - E-mail: fm2faahm@uco.es