



Health Promotion Board
3 Second Hospital Avenue Singapore 168937
Tel. 6435 3500
Fax. 6438 3848
www.hpb.gov.sg

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PRESS RELEASE

A NEW CHAPTER FOR TOBACCO CONTROL IN SINGAPORE

In a strategic shift, Singapore's tobacco control efforts are taking the form of an unique ground-up national social movement

Singapore, 21 March 2012: The spotlight was on Singapore today, as global experts in the field of tobacco control gathered to review the latest breakthroughs in the fight against tobacco use.

2. The day after the 15th World Conference on Tobacco or Health (WCTOH) opened at Suntec City Convention Centre, Singapore's Health Promotion Board (HPB) took to the stage to showcase the country's own experience in tobacco control.

3. Since adopting international best practices in smoking control such as legislation and taxes, many countries have seen remarkable declines in smoking rates over the past two decades. An early adopter of anti-tobacco policies – involving coordinated whole-of-government efforts led by HPB together with the Health Sciences Authority (HSA), Ministry of Education (MOE) and National Environment Agency (NEA) – Singapore is no exception.

4. Between 1992 and 2010, Singapore's smoking rate fell from 18.3 per cent to 14.3 per cent, one of the lowest in the world. Nevertheless, along with the few other countries where smoking rates have dropped to about 15 per cent, bringing the smoking prevalence down further is slower and harder.

5. "Tough top-down policies have brought Singapore to where we are today, but we are aiming to reduce smoking prevalence to below 10 per cent by 2020. To achieve this desired breakthrough, Singapore cannot rely on the same old ways of doing things. To take us to the next level, we need to maintain our tough top-down approach and complement that by mobilising Singaporeans to come

forward and be part of a national ground-up social movement that will 'de-normalise' smoking and promote a tobacco-free lifestyle as the social norm," said Mr Ang Hak Seng, Chief Executive Officer, HPB.

6. To create such a nation-wide social movement in tobacco control, HPB is tapping on the extensive network of its Health Ambassadors, some who are ex-smokers themselves. HPB is also encouraging more businesses to go smoke-free by getting more business owners to see the value of smoke-free premises, and working with grassroots communities to build localised smoke-free ecosystems within residential estates.

Activating Individuals

7. Many Singaporeans are already strong supporters of smoke-free living, but the movement needs to ride on a new momentum. One of the initiatives showcased at WCTOH is the peer-led Youth Advolition for Health (YAH) Programme, which features the youngest members of HPB's Health Ambassador Network.

8. YAH gathers together youths who have an infectious zeal in encouraging others to live a healthy lifestyle. Over the past six years, YAH has grown into a movement of 450 members that reach out to 150,000 youths annually.

9. Not all YAH advocates start off with this desire to live healthy smoke-free lifestyles. As 21-year-old ITE student Jonathan Ng said: "I had no passion for health issues before and even picked up smoking. It was only after a health scare in 2009 that I realised I had to make the most of the one life I have."

10. Today, Jonathan has quit smoking and, as a leader in the YAH movement, has helped more than 150 youth smokers on their quit journeys towards a healthier lifestyle.

11. "Our research shows that most youth smokers will ignore or even rebel against anti-smoking messages if they come from figures of authority. This is why it is important for HPB to work through our youth Health Ambassadors, especially ex-smokers who can relate to the difficulties in attempting to quit. By activating Singaporean youths, HPB hopes they can inspire their peers to quit smoking as well as prevent other youths from lighting up in the first place," explained Mr Ang.

Involving Businesses

12. To get more business owners see the value of operating smoke-free premises and lobby for a smoke-free Singapore, HPB recently launched the Blue Ribbon initiative to recognise active tobacco control advocates in the business community.

13. The first to receive the Blue Ribbon award, which is an international symbol of the anti-tobacco movement, were 10 markets and food centres that have made the commitment to actively promote smoke-free messages to customers as well as openly declare they are voluntary non-smoking zones.

14. “We did this because it is a small sacrifice for the sake of health, and we believe that it should not have a big effect on our business,” said Dr Chia Chan Puay, Vice-Chairman of the Upper Boon Keng Block 17 Hawkers’ and Shopkeepers’ Association, whose food centre at Upper Boon Keng is a Blue Ribbon recipient.

15. After all, more than 85 per cent of adults in Singapore are non-smokers, many of whom are parents who prefer to bring their families to smoke-free areas so that they can protect their children from second-hand smoke.

Mobilising Communities

16. Creating voluntary smoke-free environments not only protects non-smokers, it also helps smokers quit a deadly habit. This is why HPB is working with grassroots communities to identify localised solutions that will ultimately benefit both smokers and non-smokers.

17. One of the first residential estates to work with HPB is Bukit Batok East, which has become the first residential estate in Singapore to adopt a voluntary smoking ban at the common public areas of one of its precincts.

18. Explained local grassroots leader and Chairman of Bukit Batok East Nature View Residents’ Committee Mr Ronnie Tan: “We wanted our families to have a healthier lifestyle and cleaner air to breathe. Together with HPB, local residents of Bukit Batok East mapped the estate and set up clear markers to demarcate common community spaces as smoke-free zones.”

19. A local team of Health Ambassadors was also trained and deployed to Bukit Batok East to help promote a smoke-free lifestyle and provide quit advice to smokers they meet. Smokers are encouraged to leverage on conveniently located smoking cessation services. For those who still

want to smoke, however, there are designated smoking areas positioned in such a way as to limit the impact of any second-hand smoke.

20. About 100 smokers staying at Bukit Batok East have embarked on their personal quit journeys since the Health Ambassadors started engaging residents there three months ago.

Providing about 150 touch points

21. To drive this national bottom-up social movement, HPB launched a mainstream campaign aptly called I Quit last year, encouraging smokers to make a personal pledge to quit by setting up more than 100 convenient and accessible touch points to provide a supportive network across the island.

22. Supported by a QuitLine and an I Quit Club on Facebook, these touch points have since increased from 100 to about 150, and include smoking cessation counsellors based at neighbourhood Community Clubs and pharmacies, and smoking cessation programmes developed in partnership with schools and workplaces.

23. “International studies show that most smokers have a relapse within eight days of an attempt to quit, and only five per cent manage to stay smoke-free beyond 12 months. This is why it is so important for smokers trying to quit to have a community-based supportive network made up of family, friends, ex-smokers and even Facebook acquaintances to support and encourage them not to give up when they fail at initial attempts,” said Mr Ang.

24. A year after HPB launched the I Quit movement, about 32 per cent of smokers who had pledged to kick the habit have done so successfully, with the help of HPB. Meanwhile, the number of smokers seeking help through the QuitLine has increased threefold, and the number counselled at pharmacies has doubled.

25. By sharing at WCTOH 2012 Singapore’s unique approach to tobacco control, which involves creating a national social movement by mobilising youths, businesses and the community, HPB hopes to challenge global mindsets in addressing the tobacco epidemic.

26. To complement its tough top-down measures, Singapore has embarked on a new chapter in tobacco control efforts that seeks to ‘de-normalise’ the smoking habit and promote smoke-free living as a social norm.

ANNEX A: Milestones in Singapore’s Tobacco Control Experience

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Media Contact:

WCTOH Media Centre

Venue: Room No 328, Level 3, Suntec City Convention Centre

DID: +65 6821 0210 / +65 6821 0212

Email: media@wctoh2012.org

MILESTONES SINGAPORE'S TOBACCO CONTROL EXPERIENCE

1970	Laws introduced on smoking control and prohibiting smoking in public places
1971	First country in Asia to ban tobacco advertisements
1972	Tobacco taxes introduced
1979	First national smoking control campaign
1980	Smoking & Diseases' programme reaches out to school children and national servicemen
1986	Formation of the national smoking control programme to holistically cultivate a tobacco-free lifestyle among the people of Singapore
1990	Promotion of smoke-free workplaces
1991	First country to ban duty-free cigarettes
1993	Prohibition of sale of tobacco to minors
1994-97	Progressive extension of smoke-free bans to all air-conditioned places
1999	QuitLine set up to provide further support for the public
2004	Singapore becomes one of the first signatories to the World Health Organisation's international treaty on tobacco use, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), and also the first in Asia to implement Graphic Health Warnings on cigarette packets
2005	Targeted programmes reach out to the Malay community and youths
2006	Second Rotation of Graphic Health Warnings
2009	Singapore Duty-Paid Cigarette (SDPC) marking introduced to deter contraband cigarettes
2012	Blue Ribbon smoke-free movement kicks off
2013	Third Rotation of Graphic Health Warnings, and laws requiring misleading descriptors to be banned and cigarillos to be sold in packs of 20