

Letter to the Editor

Smoking, health and education

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The fact that professional activities in the area of education are daily affected by the problem of smoking among young people has motivated researchers to study this theme. Our motivation has always been targeted towards the understanding of the reasons that lead young people to tobacco use. What factors are related to tobacco consumption? What beliefs and values are related to the initiation of the smoking habit among young people? How are smoking control programs structured? Have the laws pertinent to this theme been appropriately adjusted to reality?

The need for an interdisciplinary study to investigate the theme is immediately obvious. We have been developing a study in order to find answers to these questions based on social psychology, medical and legal aspects.

Mankind has searched for various pleasure modalities concerning physical, intellectual or emotional areas, depending on the individual and of the specific moment in the life of the individual. Drug use is one of the various ways of obtaining such pleasure.

Brazil is one of the four largest tobacco producers in the world. Tobacco use is quite common:⁽¹⁾ approximately one-third of the population in Brazil smokes. The study of smoking consumption involves psychosocial, economic, health, legal, religious and other aspects.

Cigarettes account for the lion's share of the smoking pandemic, comprising 1 billion, 100 million smokers (one-quarter of the global population). Six trillion cigarettes are consumed per year (130 billion in Brazil), totaling 1034 cigarettes per inhabitant of the Earth, including newborn infants.⁽¹⁻²⁾ Of all smokers, 300 million (23%) live in developed countries, and 73% live in developing countries. In 1998, the

Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) estimated that the nationwide prevalence was 30 million smokers, corresponding at that time to 32.6% of the population, two-thirds of which resided in urban areas. It is estimated that, in the state of São Paulo, there are currently 8 million smokers and 3 million children who are passive smokers.⁽¹⁾

Approximately 150,000 scientific papers, all published within the past 30 years, have shown the harmful effects of tobacco use. It is known that tobacco consumption is the second leading cause of death worldwide, surpassed only by hunger, and that smoking kills 3 million people every year,⁽³⁾ which translates to 8220 deaths per day, or 343 every hour. In tobacco smoke, 4720 substances have been identified, and 56 diseases in humans, some of which are highly lethal or potentially incapacitating, have been linked to several of these substances.

Analyzing the problem in legal terms, we know there are, in force, various codes, directives, temporary regulations, resolutions etc., established by federal, state and city governments, concerning smoking.

We wonder whether scientific and legal knowledge is sufficient and appropriate for the implementation of smoking control programs. Some studies have shown that cigarette consumption begins in adolescence, generally between the ages of 13 and 15, when teenagers look for acceptance by their peers and integration into society.⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾

Smoking is a serious public health problem. Adolescence is a propitious period of life for the tobacco industry to invest in the implementation of smoking habits (and, therefore, win over potential consumers of their drug). There are laws that presently regulate cigarette advertising and that restrict tobacco use in public places.

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We perceive the need for interdisciplinary approaches that make the methodological connections among the various areas. Through such approaches, we can comprehend the process and increase the efficacy and the efficiency of tobacco control programs. In addition, we should implement studies that involve subjective elements in the discussion of the various areas of knowledge, especially in the legal area.

In education, a wider, more efficacious and efficient discussion among educators and students is necessary. Questions concerning the hazardous health effects caused by smoking among children and adolescents in school should be taken more seriously.

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