



First worldwide public health treaty on the way

The World Health Organization hopes to present an International Framework Convention for Tobacco Control to its general assembly later this month — just in time for World No-Tobacco Day on May 31.

If the convention is adopted, WHO will ask its 191 member states, including Canada, to sign it by 2003.

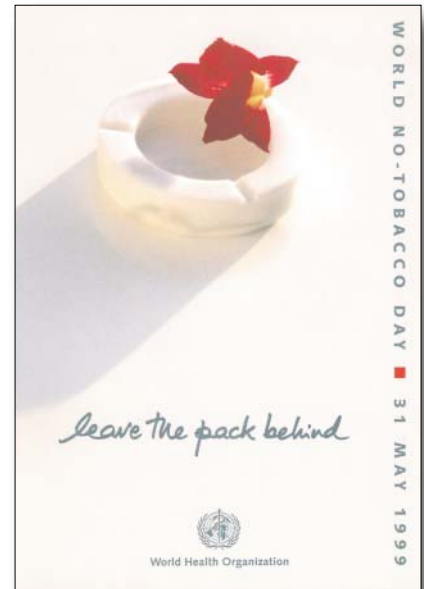
The move would force signatories to place drastic curbs on the way tobacco is advertised, marketed, taxed and grown. In effect, it would be the first worldwide public health treaty.

This move is a marked departure for WHO. The international organization used to believe that individual countries and health organizations should deal with the issues surrounding tobacco. Now it is convinced that smoking is a global issue that has to be addressed on an international scale.

“WHO cannot remain indifferent,” says Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director general. “We need to free our population — in particular the young — from the tobacco pandemic.”

WHO says that at least 3.5 million people died in 1998 as a result of smoking and other forms of tobacco use. By the 2020s, the tobacco-related death toll is expected to reach 10 million annually, with 70% of the deaths occurring in developing countries. “By 2020, the burden of disease attributable to tobacco is expected to outweigh that caused by any single other disease,” warned Brundtland.

In July 1998 she established a project, the Tobacco Free Initiative, to coordinate a global strategic response to tobacco as an important public health issue. A Canadian, Dr. Enis Baris of the International Develop-

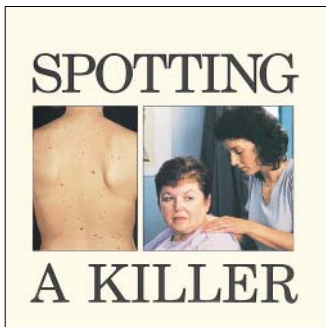


ment Research Centre, sits on the initiative’s Strategy and Policy Advisory Committee.

The initiative is forming partnerships with a wide range of nongovernmental organizations and others. For example, it is working with UNICEF to prevent children and adolescents from starting to smoke, and with the World Bank to develop more effective uses of excise tax and with academic centres to gather research.

More information is available at www.who.int/toh or www.idrc.ca/tobacco.

Killer video highlights skin cancer signs



Thousands of health care providers will soon have access to a 12-minute video aimed at early detection of skin cancer. *Spotting a Killer — Early Detection of Skin Cancer by Health Care Providers* is the brainchild of Dr. Jason Rivers, who headed the Canadian Dermatology Association’s National Sun Awareness and Skin Cancer Prevention Program for 7 years. Rivers, who narrates the 12-minute video, said it is crucial to educate health care providers because they have contact with so many potential cancer victims. The video shows what skin cancers look like, who is at high risk, what action to take when a suspicious lesion or mole is noticed, and how to counsel patients to prevent this disease. It has been distributed to 800 hospitals, 200 schools of nursing, 13 schools of physiotherapy and various colleges and associations. For information, call 604 985-9184.

Eliminating racism in medicine

An organization representing African-American physicians says US medical schools should open more places to black students and change their curricula so that all medical students are exposed to issues of racial and gender health. The National Medical Association says “380 years of racism” has affected many aspects of care provided to African-Americans. It is also concerned with a trend toward eliminating affirma-

tive-action legislation; the NMA says the entry of minority students to medical school has declined by 12% since 1994. African-Americans currently account for only 3% of American physicians and 2% of medical school faculty members. “As we advance on the cusp of a new millennium,” said NMA Past President Gary Dennis, “the association asks that racism in medicine be recognized and finally eliminated.”