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Health professionals to promote a new code of conduct on tobacco control

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HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TO PROMOTE A NEW CODE OF CONDUCT ON TOBACCO CONTROL

New code asks health professionals to lead by example, and reduce smoking themselves

Geneva - To stem trends in tobacco use, which currently causes nearly five million deaths per year, healthcare professional associations today agreed to promote a new code of conduct. The associations, meeting this week at the World Health Organization (WHO), represent members in almost all countries. The code looks at tangible ways to stop the use of a product which will eventually kill half of its regular users.

Participants included professional associations representing pharmacists, dentists, nurses, midwives, chiropractors and physicians. During the discussions, professionals vowed to increase and strengthen tobacco surveillance, cessation programmes, ensure access to tobacco-free healthcare facilities and implement education and community advocacy programmes.

“When it comes to tobacco use, health professionals have the opportunity to help people change their behaviour. Their involvement is key to successfully curbing the tobacco epidemic,” said Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, Director of the Tobacco Free Initiative, WHO. “For example, if dentists warned all their patients that smoking causes excess plaque, yellowing teeth and contributes to tooth decay, as well as a five-fold increased risk of oral cancer, the impact on smoking would be dramatic.”

Studies have shown that even brief counselling by health professionals on the dangers of smoking and importance of quitting is one of the most cost-effective methods of reducing smoking.

According to the proposed code of conduct, health professionals shall also lead by example. They should act as role-models for their patients, by ceasing to smoke, and by ensuring their workplaces and public facilities are smoke and tobacco-free.

Smoking prevalence among health professionals in many countries is the same if not higher than the average of the population. In Albania in 2000, 44% of medical students smoked, compared with 39% of the population. In Saudi Arabia, 20% of the doctors smoke whereas the average for the population is 13%.

The participants agreed that another important role of health professionals is to introduce tobacco control in the public health agenda at country level, supporting the political process through the

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signature and ratification of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) by their governments, and supporting the implementation of the Convention by their own members.

In a display of support for the Convention, the associations have decided to create a list of 'mirror signatures', which will be open for signature by all affiliates and members.

Dr Catherine Le Galès-Camus, Assistant Director-General for Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, WHO, said: "With 1.1 billion people addicted to tobacco and five million annual deaths, tobacco should continue to be a priority on the health agenda." She added: "We would like these associations to convey the message that this is the time for government action, as we now have, with the WHO FCTC, the right tool to fight this epidemic".

Notes for the editors:

The WHO FCTC, adopted in May 2003, sets out the standards on tobacco-related issues, such as price and tax increases, illicit trade, labelling, advertising and sponsorship and second-hand smoke. Since its adoption, 87 countries and the European Community have signed it, and six (Fiji, Malta, New Zealand, Norway, Seychelles, Sri Lanka) have ratified it (as at 29 January 2003).

The WHO FCTC will be open for signature in the United Nations Headquarters in New York until 29 June 2004. Member States that sign the Convention indicate that they will strive in good faith to ratify it. Countries wishing to become a party to the Convention after 29 June 2004 may do so by means of accession.

The FCTC will become law 90 days after 40 countries have signed and ratified it, binding the countries that are parties to the Treaty to legislate according to its provisions.

For further information and for the working document of the *Health Professional code of conduct on tobacco control* please contact: Marta Seoane, Communications Officer, Tobacco Free Initiative, WHO, tel. +41 (0)22 791 2489, or +41 (0) 764 755 551 seoanem@who.int

For more information on the WHO FCTC, please visit the following internet site:
<http://www.who.int/tobacco/en>