

MANILA BULLETIN

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‘Tobacco taxes up coffers, but health costs are rising’

It would seem that the government would be conflicted on the issue of smoking as a health and economic problem, because while the health department has a program to encourage the stopping of smoking, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, on the other hand, is raking billions in taxes that in 2005 reached P95 billion.

A large amount from the P276 billion spent yearly on health care is spent on treating tobacco-related diseases, according to the framework Convention on Tobacco Control Alliance Philippines (FCAP)

A World Health Organization 2005 to 2006 research showed the P276 billion is spent to treat only four major diseases- lung cancer, heart attacks, stroke and chronic lung obstruction.

It added these diseases are a huge economic burden for the country, as a whole, and for the affected families, in particular, and one result has been loss of productive workdays.

The group also lamented that if just 20 percent of the huge amount is save by not smoking, that saving of P44 billion could have been channeled to the purchase of food - a full 30 percent of Filipinos said they have been hungry - and the shelter, with the group noting the proliferation of squatters in every urban center.

“Government spending on smoking - related diseases just doesn’t make sense. Something has to be done to lessen this unnecessary spending. And the most effective way to do that is by putting a graphic health warning in every cigarette pack,”said FCAP executive director Dr. Maricar Limpin.

Such a warning is in several bills that are pending in Congress, but suspected tobacco lobby activity, according to observers, may be hindering their passage.

One of the bills is House Bill 3364, authorized by Rep. Paul Daza of Samar. It seeks to have half of the space in the front and back of the cigarette pack devoted to the picture health warning.

Limpin said that what is pitiful is that tobacco tends to be used in a big way by those who are poor because a stick of cigarette costing P2 enables them to escape their difficult situation for a few minutes of blissful smoke.

“Studies have shown that among those in the lowest - income group, 2.7 percent of the monthly household expenditures go to cigarette while education and health takes only 1.6 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively,” said Limpin.

The FCAP said it fully believed that if the picture - based health warning is implemented, the death rate from tobacco - related illnesses will slow down, and budgets for health care could be reduced and reallocated to basic needs such as food and fuel.

A survey for the Council on Tobacco and Health and Air Pollution of the Philippine College of Chest Physicians has shown that majority of smokers in Metro Manila said a picture - based health warning against smoking would most likely make them quit rather than a text - based health warning.