

Guardian
Unlimited

Parents warned not to smoke at home

Children are developing diseases because adults light up in front of them

Denis Campbell, health correspondent
Sunday June 24, 2007

Observer

Children are contracting serious illnesses because of their parents smoking at home, says the government's chief medical officer, who has warned adults not to light up in front of their sons and daughters.

In an interview with The Observer, Sir Liam Donaldson, Britain's most senior doctor, pledged that there would be a further sustained crackdown on smoking after the ban comes into force in England next Sunday.

He promised renewed public health advertising campaigns to try to educate parents who smoke. 'We will strengthen and make regular the message to parents about the risks to their children of smoking. This is something we will need to constantly remind them about.'

'The dangers of parents smoking in front of their children are increased risk of respiratory diseases, bronchitis, middle ear infections, asthma attacks in children that are prone to asthma and increased risk to babies if there is a pregnant person in the household.'

'While the number of parents who smoke is falling, children's exposure to parental smoke remains "a problem area", he said.

Future plans to restrict smoking include

- Removing cigarettes from public display;
- Putting graphic picture warnings on cigarette packets showing the health effects of smoking, including blocked arteries, rotten teeth and gangrene;
- Outlawing the sale of packets of 10 cigarettes to deter consumption, especially among children;
- Reducing the number of cigarettes that Britons can bring into the country from inside the EU from 3,200 to 200.

The number of Britons who smoke has fallen to 24 per cent and ministers hope going smoke-free will over time bring about another 4 or 5 per cent drop. 'But if we want to go further we have got to reinforce all these other tobacco measures and denormalise smoking completely,' said Donaldson.

'The first of July is not when action stops; it's a launchpad from which we can make further massive strides. I hope people will be behind some of the slightly controversial measures.'

He wants cigarettes to be hidden away in shops. 'If you walk into the average supermarket one of the things that confronts you straight away is a wall of cigarettes. That's unhelpful. I'd like to see them remove the wall of cigarettes and keep them under the counter,' said Donaldson.

'Some people would resent the idea of cigarettes being kept under the counter like magazines that you wouldn't want displayed. But I think that these are all part of the denormalisation process. Supermarkets are big, responsible organisations which already try to help on things like obesity. Wouldn't they like to strike another blow for health and play their part on a disease that still kills over 100,000 a year?'

Health campaigners last night welcomed Donaldson's pledges. Professor John Britton, a consultant in respiratory medicine and chair of the Royal College of Physicians' tobacco advisory group, said: 'If you take

care of your child and do the things responsible parents do, such as making sure your child is safe in the car, to then smoke in the same building as them is irrational and irresponsible. To do that is a serious assault on the children's health and wellbeing.'

Dr Vivienne Nathanson, head of science and ethics at the British Medical Association, said ensuring cigarettes became an under-the-counter product would help reduce smoking among children. 'We know that there's a potent link between children recognising cigarette packets, for example through their colours, and starting to smoke,' she said. 'So the less they see, the less they will recognise and the less likely they will be to see tobacco as an aspirational product.'

Simon Clark, director of smokers' rights group Forest, criticised the proposals. 'It's wrong to draw an automatic correlation between children seeing parents smoke and then assuming that they will take up smoking. There's a generation of people today who grew up in an era when a lot of adults smoked yet many of them are non-smokers. It's incredibly hypocritical of government to try to denormalise smoking and vilify smoking and imply that it's an anti-social activity given the enormous amount of tax the government makes from tobacco.'

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007