

Global harm reduction organisations urge recognition of tobacco harm reduction

STAR HEALTH REPORT

Advocacy organisations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia Pacific— In a united effort, representing millions of adult consumers who use nicotine products that do not involve combustion, they have sent a letter to the Special Rapporteur to the United Nations Human Rights Council. The correspondence addresses recent comments made in a recent report regarding the validity of Tobacco Harm Reduction and urges the United Nations to recognise its importance in promoting public health.

The letter, signed by organisations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia Pacific, highlights the significant impact that THR has had on reducing smoking rates and improving public health in their respective regions. It also emphasises the need for the United Nations to acknowledge and support THR as a legitimate harm reduction strategy, as they have already done with drugs and sex work.

According to the World Health Organisation, tobacco use is responsible for over 8 million deaths each year, with the majority of these deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries.

Reducing the harm from tobacco includes the use of alternative nicotine products that have been proven to be an effective tool in reducing the harm caused by traditional combustible cigarettes. The evidence is in reduced smoking rates in the United Kingdom, Japan, New Zealand, and Sweden. The letter urges the United Nations to take a science-based approach and recognise the validity of THR as a harm reduction strategy. It also calls for the inclusion of THR in the upcoming United Nations High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases, as well as in future tobacco control policies and initiatives.



Devil’s Breath: truth or urban legend?

DR ZUBAIR KHALED HUQ

Stories about Datura are heard since childhood. One can be hypnotised if you take or inhale Datura. Scopolamine is also present in Jimson Weed (*Datura stramonium*), a plant found in most of the Latin American countries. Devil’s Breath effects seem to be quite like Datura. Pharmacologically, scopolamine is classified as an anticholinergic medication and belladonna alkaloid.

We see and hear news about its charismatic influence by the imposters. Blown into the face, glued in slips, to render unaware citizens incapacitated. A state that left victims with no ability to control their actions, leaving them at risk of being robbed, goods stolen, or raped by a criminal. Are these scenes totally real or an urban legend making a mockery?

Devil’s Breath is derived from the flower of the “Borrachero” shrub, common in Colombia. The seeds, when powdered and extracted, contain a chemical similar to scopolamine called “Burandanga.” The compound leads to



hallucinations, frightening images, and a lack of free will. Amnesia, leaving the victim powerless to recall events or identify perpetrators. It blocks the muscarinic receptors, causing hallucination.

Also used as medicine to reduce gastric motility in vomiting and seasickness. The active ingredient is available in a 1 milligram transdermal patch worn behind the ear to reduce motion sickness or postoperative nausea and vomiting. Whereas the criminals use large amounts, like grams and milligrams, that dose is toxic. Motor activity is blocked, starts to work within twenty minutes, and remains up to eight hours.

Overdose can cause heart attack, respiratory failure, and death. In large doses, it can cause respiratory failure and death. Overdoses can lead to fast heart rate, dilated pupils, toxic psychosis, confusion, vivid hallucinations, seizures, or coma, among other events; it can also be added to food and drinks. It can even be made in the laboratories.

These effects are due to oral administration in liquid or powder form in foods and beverages, not being blown into one’s face or absorbed via a piece of soaked paper. Side effects like dry mouth, blurred vision, headache, urinary retention, and dizziness can occur even at the low dose.

As a preventive measure, one can wear a mask outside and not leave food or drinks unattended when travelling. Do not accept food or drinks from strangers. Seek medical assistance immediately if you believe you have been drugged.

The writer is a gerontologist and a public health specialist.
E-mail: zubairkhaledjoy@gmail.com

Thinking of switching your diet? Choose the Mediterranean diet



MD BILLAL HOSSEN

Are you tired of eating biryani, fried chicken, or fast food regularly? Are you looking for a healthy solution? If yes, a Mediterranean diet can be the best solution for your health.

The Mediterranean diet is a traditional diet followed by the people living along the borderlands of the Mediterranean Sea and originated during the 1960s in Greece and Southern Italy. The style of this diet is unique and appealing.

The Mediterranean diet prioritises vegetables, fruits, whole grains (such as rice, wheat, barley, and maize), beans, nuts, seeds, and legumes. It also includes low-fat or fat-free dairy products, fish, poultry, eggs, and vegetable oils in moderate amounts.

This diet restricts excessive sugary foods, excessive oily foods, sugary beverages, ultra-high processed foods (UHPF), refined carbohydrates,

- saturated fats, and processed meats.
- If you want to be healthy, you must choose the Mediterranean diet. While shifting dietary patterns, you can wisely select the Mediterranean style, as it is one of the best dietary styles to heal your body.
- This diet has several potential benefits. They are as follows:
- It helps maintain the body’s cholesterol level in a homeostatic condition, preventing heart disease and stroke.
 - It reduces the risk of obesity as the diet consists of low carbohydrates and fats.
 - It reduces inflammation and oxidative stress in the body as the diet is rich in different types of antioxidants (such as polyphenols, flavonoids, and carotenoids) and also contains complex phytonutrients that exert beneficial effects on our body.
 - It controls blood sugar levels as the Mediterranean diet is rich in insoluble fibre from fruits and vegetables.
 - It prevents plaque formation in the arteries and maintains a proper balance of fat in the human body.
 - It also boosts brain health.
- Besides these benefits, the Mediterranean diet has many other positive impacts on our body. When an individual wants to switch their diet from a traditional Western pattern to a healthy meal pattern, they can easily follow the guidelines of the Mediterranean diet. This can be one of the best decisions in life. In fact, everyone should try to follow this diet to become physically, mentally, and socially fit.

The writer is a Lecturer at the Department of Food Engineering and Nutrition Science at State University of Bangladesh. Email: billal.jet@sub.edu.bd

Pioneering global delivery of childhood cancer medications

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital have launched the distribution of essential childhood cancer medicines in Mongolia and Uzbekistan as part of the Global Platform for Access to Childhood Cancer Medicines. This initiative aims to provide free, quality-assured cancer treatments to children in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The treatments will reach approximately 5000 children across 30 hospitals within these countries this year, with upcoming shipments planned for Ecuador, Jordan, Nepal, and Zambia.

The Global Platform is the first of its kind and will eventually expand to 50 countries over the next 5 to 7 years. Its goal is to treat 120,000 children with cancer in LMICs, significantly reducing mortality rates, as childhood cancer survival rates in these countries are often below 30%, far lower than in high-income nations.

WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasised the importance of the initiative, stating, “For too long, children with cancer have lacked access to life-saving medicines.” St. Jude CEO Dr. James R. Downing added, “A child’s chances of surviving cancer are largely determined by where they are born,” highlighting the stark disparities in global healthcare.

Launched in 2021, the platform unites governments, the pharmaceutical industry, and NGOs to provide comprehensive support, from market shaping to medicine selection and treatment standards.

Source: World Health Organisation



Strengthening alliances and building movements to end female genital mutilation

Joint statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr Natalia Kanem, UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell and WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus



Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a grave violation of human rights that causes lifelong physical, emotional, and psychological harm to girls and women. It currently affects over 230 million girls and women, and by 2030, an estimated 27 million more could suffer this abuse if immediate action is not taken.

On the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WHO reaffirm their commitment to ending this harmful practice. The theme for this year, “*Stepping up the pace: Strengthening alliances and building movements to end female genital mutilation*,” emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts. Countries like Kenya and Uganda show that strengthening alliances and community-led actions can drive significant change.

Since the launch of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme in 2008, nearly 7 million girls and women have gained access to prevention and protection services. Moreover, 48 million people have publicly pledged to abandon FGM, and 220 million individuals have been reached through mass media campaigns. Over the past two years, grassroots organisations and community workers have been key in galvanising change.

However, progress remains fragile. In the Gambia, for example, there have been attempts to repeal the ban on FGM, threatening decades of hard-won progress. Only seven countries are on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal of ending FGM by 2030. Urgent action, stronger alliances, greater accountability, and investment in proven interventions are crucial to achieving this goal.

The time to end FGM is now, and every individual has a role to play in protecting girls and ensuring their rights are upheld.

Source: World Health Organisation

Advances in cancer treatment and the role of medical oncology

STAR HEALTH DESK

On 4 February 2025, the global community observed World Cancer Day, a time to raise awareness about cancer prevention, detection, and treatment. This year’s theme, “*Close the Care Gap*,” highlighted the importance of equitable access to cancer care and the latest advancements in oncology. In line with this mission, we spoke with Dr Tan Wei Chong, a Consultant in Medical Oncology at the National Cancer Centre, Singapore, to explore the evolving landscape of cancer treatment and the critical role of early detection and personalised medicine. Dr Tan specialises in lung and genitourinary cancers and has extensive experience in managing complex cancer cases.

1. The role of a medical oncologist
Medical oncologists focus on the medical aspects of cancer treatment, which traditionally meant chemotherapy. However, with advancements over the last two decades, their role has expanded to include immunotherapy, targeted therapy, and hormonal therapy. “We work alongside surgeons and radiation oncologists to provide comprehensive care, especially for patients with locally advanced or metastatic cancer,” he said.

2. Advances in cancer treatments
Dr Tan highlighted significant progress in immunotherapy and targeted therapy. “Immunotherapy, particularly immune checkpoint inhibitors, has revolutionised treatment, offering better efficacy and fewer side effects,” he said. He also noted the rise of targeted therapy, especially in lung cancer. “In Asia, many non-smoking-related lung cancers have specific mutations that can be targeted, allowing patients to maintain a good quality of life.”

3. Cancer awareness and early

detection
Modern treatments have improved outcomes. “While cancer is not always curable, it is almost always treatable. The key is finding the right treatment for the right patient,” he said. He stressed the importance of early detection through screening programmes for cancers like breast, cervical, and colon cancer. “Early detection can lead to early intervention, greatly improving the chances of a cure,” he explained.

4. Managing side effects



Dr Tan discussed advancements in managing treatment side effects. “With modern antiemetics and supportive treatments, most patients can continue their treatment without hospitalisation,” he said. He emphasised the importance of patient education. “Patients need to be aware of potential side effects and report symptoms like fever promptly.”

5. Preventing common cancers
Dr Tan highlighted the role of lifestyle changes in cancer prevention. “Smoking and alcohol consumption are major risk factors. Reducing

tobacco exposure, especially in Asia, could significantly impact cancer incidence,” he said. He also underscored the importance of screening programmes for breast and cervical cancer.

6. Personalised medicine
Dr Tan explained how personalised medicine has transformed oncology. “We can now tailor therapies based on the genetic makeup of a patient’s tumour. This approach is revolutionising cancer care,” he said.

7. Message for Bangladeshis
Dr Tan shared a message for individuals and families dealing with cancer in Bangladesh. “Early detection and access to the right treatments are key. I encourage patients to seek timely medical advice and adhere to screening programmes,” he said. For healthcare providers, he emphasised staying updated with the latest advancements in oncology.

These insights highlight the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to cancer care, the promise of personalised medicine, and the critical role of early detection and lifestyle changes in reducing cancer risk.

