

The Plight of Non-smokers and the Nurses' Responsibility

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There are many health hazards about which the public may not be aware. One such hazard is fumes of cigarettes which non-smokers inhale in the company of smokers. This increasing danger to health and well-being that non-smokers face at the hands of smokers goes unnoticed. Normally, when it is stated that "Cigarette smoking is injurious to health", people only think that the one who smokes is being harmed. But the findings of a study done by the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A., and the Independent Scientific Committee on Smoking and Health, England indicate that non-smokers sitting in smoke-filled rooms, buses, or public places inhale as much as 50 times more of tar-based, carcinogenic (cancer-causing) components than those who smoke. What is surprising is that those who never smoked in their lives are also dying of cancer because they have been inhaling smoke. The disease risk due to inhalation of cigarette smoke is not limited to the individual who is smoking, it goes beyond. Some people smoke only in the presence of others, i.e. for purely social reason. Others enjoy cigarettes as a sedative or for relaxation, and some smoke at the time of feeling stress. For them, cigarette smoking is a tension relieving device.

In China, the main reason the Chinese smoke is social. Hosts offer cigarettes to guests as a sign of hospitality and sincere friendship. Once an individual starts smoking for social courtesies, a habit is formed and he smokes in spite of knowing about health hazards, like chronic bronchitis, heart diseases, cancer, hernia, ulcers, gum and tooth decay, etc. At the same time, he may not be aware about the plight of non-smokers or passive or involuntary or forced smokers who have no choice but to breathe smoke-filled air. The smoke has cigarettes has most of the same harmful cancer causing parts of smoke that is inhaled by

smokers. It has serious repercussions on the health of the smokers' family members. Studies have revealed that non-smoking wives of husbands who smoke have 35 per cent increased risk of having cancer, compared to women whose husbands do not smoke.

Effect on Non-smokers

Tobacco smoking is not just a fleeting nuisance, it is a tangible health hazard causing a burning sensation in the eyes, irritation in the nose and throat of non-smokers who share an indoor space with smokers. Research studies have shown that children of parents who smoke are twice as likely to be affected by various diseases. The tragic fact is that parents who smoke are actually killing their kids. For every 10 cigarettes a man smokes, his family smokes three. Housewives suffer from extra hazards during pregnancy as the growth of the unborn child in the womb is retarded by the effect of carbon monoxide and nicotine to the baby's blood stream, lessening its supply of oxygen and accelerating its heart beat, thereby the new born child is more likely to be frequently ill.

Secondly, in an indoor atmosphere and in confined spaces, the health of a passive smoker is more endangered than any where else. The side stream smoke has five times more carbon monoxide and three times more tar which is carcinogenic along with other noxious substances in the smoke. If inhalation of side stream smoke is confined or is in a packed places for an hour, it is equivalent to smoking one cigarette.

To bring this above awareness in public, the nurses need to organise and educate non-smokers who have a right to remain healthy and especially in India where majority of women are non-smokers. They must protest against being passive smokers. It is true that those who have formed the habit of smoking will find it hard to leave it, but they have no right to give the smoke fumes to non-smokers. Nursing, being a predominantly

women's profession, should take a lead to protect the rights of women and non-smokers. Further, nurses being health educators should accept it as a moral duty to inform the public about the harm caused by smokers to non-smokers.

How can nurses help?

Some of the ways in which the nurses can help in a non-smoking campaign are listed below:

a) In all the State branches of the Trained Nurses Association of India, a cell can be created for educating the public by organising meetings of housewives and educating them on the harm caused to them by their cigarette smoking husbands.

b) During the Nurses' Week, special campaigns can be organised to educate public.

c) Some slogans can be coined for the rights of non-smokers and displayed at important places.

d) Smokers can be discouraged from smoking in public places, e.g., hospitals, offices, cinema halls, buses and trains.

e) In groups and gatherings, smokers can be asked to go and smoke at lonely places.

f) Nurses can especially intervene in implementation of non-smoking practices. Wherever, a nurse finds an opportunity to protect the rights of non-smokers, she can educate the smokers. All the nurses should take a pledge to work for the rights of non-smokers which is a need of the hour.

In China, the government has taken the major step of declaring 100 public places in the Beijing city smoke-free, including hospitals, public transport and sports areas. Beijing's action in anti-smoking legislation could serve as a model for India also. In many other countries too, non-smoking in public places is considered to be a norm and is frequently enforced by legislation. More than 30 States in U.S.A have passed legislations to protect the rights of non-smokers. India also needs such a legislation to protect the non-smokers.

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