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Israel can do better against smoking

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One of America's leading experts on tobacco prevention and cessation says Israel needs grassroots leadership to reduce the smoking rate from its current 23.5 percent, given that the Treasury collects NIS 3.3 billion in tobacco taxes and Health Minister Ya'acov Ben-Yizri has chosen to take a relatively passive approach to the subject.

Prof. Michael Eriksen, the director of the Institute of Public Health at Georgia State University and former director of the Office on Smoking and Health in the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, made the comments in an interview Wednesday - Israel's official No-Smoking Day - after delivering the keynote speech at the second National Conference for Smoking Prevention and Cessation.

The conference, held at the Kibbutz Ramat Rahel Hotel just outside Jerusalem, attracted over 100 participants and was sponsored by the Health Ministry, the four health funds, the Israel Defense Forces Medical Corps, the Israel Police, the Education Ministry and others.

"Israel has smart people and good laws to reduce active and passive smoking, and the situation is better than in some countries like Germany, Japan, Spain or Switzerland, but it's not doing as well as the US, Canada and Ireland," he said. "You can do much better." In the US, the highest smoking rates are among younger whites, while in Israel, they are among the poor, IDF soldiers, Arabs, the less-educated, and younger people. In California, the rate has already gone down to 14%, while Israel's forward-looking Healthy Israel 2020 program hopes to reach 15.1% in 12 years.

Among Eriksen's suggestions for reducing the smoking rate were raising tobacco taxes significantly and using most of them to campaign against smoking; finding an influential, respected Israeli to promote a visible campaign to change social norms; barring tobacco companies' use of glamorous images; requiring graphic images on cigarette packages to discourage lighting up; regulating and monitoring tobacco products and companies; prohibiting smoking in all indoor areas, including legal smoking rooms; and holding the tobacco industry accountable for the harm it has caused.

The number of cumulative deaths from tobacco around the world since 1950 was 70 million at the turn of the 21st century, Eriksen said, but it is projected to reach 520 million by 2050 if nothing significant is done.

Dr. Leah Rosen, who chairs the Healthy Israel 2020 subcommittee on tobacco and teaches and does research at the health promotion unit at Tel Aviv University's School for Public Health, said the authorities spend only 14 agorot per Israeli to fight tobacco, while the CDC in Atlanta recommends spending \$6 to \$16 per person, given Israel's population. "An estimated 270,000 Israeli kids alive today will eventually die from smoking if this situation continues," she declared.