

UK treads softly on smoking

John Warden, *parliamentary correspondent BMJ*

The British government's long awaited action plan to reduce cigarette smoking contains 20 initiatives, but apart from a statutory ban on advertising these rely on persuasion rather than coercion. There are no new restrictions or bans on smoking, but an emphasis on cessation through cooperation.

The main innovation announced in a recent white paper, *Smoking Kills*, is a £60m scheme to help adults stop smoking, with one week's free supply of nicotine patches for people on low incomes. The scheme will begin next April in pilot areas where general practitioners will be able to refer people who want to give up smoking to a course of specialist counselling.

Other antismoking measures target teenagers and pregnant women, against a background of what the white paper sees as the beginning of a new upward trend in smoking that causes 120 000 premature deaths a year and costs the NHS £1.7bn (\$2.9bn). Despite this, the more robust approach of the health secretary, Frank Dobson, is tempered by the well known aversion of the prime minister, Tony Blair, to being accused of introducing a "nanny state." "We

recognise that people have a choice," Mr Blair states.

As a consequence, the force of law is used only against the tobacco companies, whom Mr Dobson accused in the Commons of "murdering people." The European directive banning tobacco advertising and sponsorship that was agreed last summer (*BMJ* 1998;316:1334) will be implemented this year, starting with an end to advertising in the media and on billboards. Most sports sponsorship will end by 2003, with an exemption for Formula 1 motor racing until 2006.

By contrast, the government will put £50m into a publicity campaign. "For years, tobacco companies have spent millions on advertising. Now we are prepared to do the same," the white paper states.

Other measures are largely voluntary by agreement with trade organisations. These include a proof of age card for young people, minimal advertising in shops, and siting vending machines to prevent their use by children. Criminal sanctions against retailers who persistently sell cigarettes to underage children are being considered.

Pregnant women who smoke will be a focus of action at local

The main points in the white paper are:

- End tobacco advertising and sponsorship
- New NHS service to help smokers give up
- A week's free nicotine patches for the worst off
- Mass media publicity campaign
- National proof of age card
- Prevent child access to vending machines
- Choice for non-smokers in public places
- Code of practice for smoking at work
- Tobacco tax increases
- Action against tobacco smuggling

level as new smoking cessation services are developed. Nicotine replacement therapy is not advocated for pregnant women, but this will be subject to further research.

The government does not propose to ban smoking in public places or at work. It is, however, negotiating a "public places charter" for non-smoking areas and improved ventilation in pubs and restaurants. There is to be a new code of practice on smoking in the workplace. Smuggling of cheap tobacco is to be countered by strengthening customs surveillance.

Health professionals are urged to advise patients to give up smoking. "When a doctor talks to a smoker about the benefits of giving up, it can be a powerful motivator," says the white paper.

In the Commons, Dr Peter Brand, a Liberal Democrat MP,

was disappointed at the minimal support for people who want to give up smoking. He said it took 6-12 weeks, and one week's supply of Nicorette was neither here nor there. Mr Dobson said a week's supply would cost about £15, which was less than smokers spent on cigarettes. With increasing incomes, cigarettes require 60% less purchasing power than in 1965.

Through what it claims is a comprehensive, sustained, and resourced approach, the government hopes that 1 500 000 fewer people will be smoking by 2010. Mr Dobson said that smoking is a principal cause of the health gap that leads to poorer people dying sooner. That was why the government would balance high tobacco tax with real support to help smokers quit. □

Smoking Kills is available from the Stationery Office, price £11.50.

Shane Warne takes money to give up smoking

Simon Chapman *Sydney*

Shane Warne, the Australian spin bowler who recently admitted that he took money from an Indian bookmaker in exchange for providing basic cricketing information, has found yet another novel way to rake in the dollars. For \$A200 000 (US\$130 800; £76 900), he has agreed to try to give up smoking and to use the smoking cessation aid Nicorette in his attempt to do so.

The announcement that he has accepted such a substantial sum from Pharmacia Upjohn, the makers of the nicotine patch and gum, has unleashed widespread media debate over the ethics of



Warne—Australians think he should not accept cash to quit smoking

the arrangement. A Melbourne radio programme recently ran a listeners' poll and found that 91% said "no" to the question "Should Shane Warne be paid \$200 000 to stop smoking?"

Radio commentators and callers to radio stations have questioned the propriety of taking money for doing something which, they argue, he should be doing anyway. Promoting

hair transplants, as former test cricketer Greg Matthews did, is one thing, but taking money to quit smoking is considered quite another.

Most people in the public health community, however, are delighted that Warne's massive popularity will be widely associated with an antismoking message. They think that his competitive and feisty personality will be more effective in influencing behaviour than the healthy role models used in past campaigns. The track record of nicotine replacement treatment shows that it has at least double the effectiveness of placebo gums and patches.

Clive Bates, the director of London-based Action on Smoking and Health, has come down on Warne's side, pointing out that his decision, particularly if he succeeds, may ultimately save lives. □