



**World Health  
Organization**

Western Pacific  
Philippines

# More than one million Filipinos have quit tobacco use

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## Joint DOH-DOF-WHO Press Release



*Panel members at the press conference include Finance Assistance Secretary Maria Teresa Habitan, Health Secretary Paulyn Jean Rosell-Ubial, WHO Philippine Representative Weiler Gundo and Dr Jean Tesche, of the WHO Headquarters Tobacco Control Economics Unit WHO/F.Lazaro*

The Philippine Department of Health (DOH) said on Monday/March 20 that a number of tobacco control interventions, particularly tobacco taxation has led to a significant drop in current smokers from 17 million (2009) to 15.9 million (2015). The Tobacco Tax Reform Law of 2012 was also called

an “anti-cancer tax” that has a significant health outcome and has increased funds available for health.

“This figure represents a relative reduction of close to 20% of smokers or in simpler terms, one million Filipinos have quit tobacco use --- the biggest decline we have seen in Philippine history, and we can do more to stop the suffering caused by this epidemic.” Other measures that have contributed to the decline in smoking are graphic health warnings, local ordinances and advocacy of the health sector in strong partnership with civil society.

This notable reduction in tobacco use translates to a million Filipinos at lower risk for cancer, heart disease asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, Philippine health officials said.

The 2015 Philippines’ Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) reported that currently only 15.9 Filipino adults currently smoked tobacco products – 40.3 among men and 5.1 % among women. Smoking among women declined by close to 50% - also a sign that measures to counteract smoking among women are working.

Health Secretary Paulyn Jean Rosell-Ubial also said that the 2015 GATS shows that 3 out of 4 smokers in the Philippines wants to quit and that families and health providers should support Filipinos who want to get out of nicotine addiction. “We need to sustain and protect our gains in tobacco taxation, expand the scope of smoke-free policies and intensify our warnings against tobacco use.”

Secretary Ubial expressed concern that while exposure to cancer-causing second hand smoke had declined significantly in public transport, government offices and workplaces --- exposure to smoking in bars and nightclubs is as high as 86.3%, and in restaurants 33.6% - posing a threat to the health of non-smoking workers in bars, nightclubs and restaurants. She also warned families against going to restaurants where smoking is still allowed indoors, even in smoking designated areas --- “ second hand smoke circulates in any enclosed area, it is carcinogenic; therefore smoking designated areas in restaurants threaten the health of children and senior citizens, in particular”, she added.

“The Philippines, as party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) should comply with Article 8 of the Treaty that calls for a complete ban on smoking in public places. The Philippines has taken positive measures that led to the doubling of the prices of tobacco products and the imposition of strict labelling requirements on cigarette packs. In support of President Duterte’s desire to replicate Davao City’s strict enforcement of smoke-free policies we need to do more to prevent 87,000 annual deaths among Filipinos, which are more than the number of deaths

due to HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined leading to an annual economic loss of approximately Php 188 billion from tobacco-related hospitalization and productivity losses”, the Secretary added.

“The Department of Health stands firmly behind all initiatives that impose smoking bans in public places where non-smokers become unwillingly exposed to second-hand smoke. It is incumbent on both the national and local governments to protect the health of all Filipinos who choose not to be exposed to cancer-causing substances in second hand smoke.” Secretary Ubial said.

While the taxation measures imposed on tobacco products since 2013 have made these products less affordable and less accessible, there are still too many Filipinos who shell out substantial amount of their monthly income to support their smoking habit. “There is still much to be done in our country’s efforts to limit and curtail tobacco use, especially for our economically disadvantaged countrymen who are the most affected with diseases linked to long use of tobacco products,” she said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Representative in the Philippines, Dr Gundo Weiler, congratulated the Philippine government and its partners from the civil society sector for their steadfast commitment in the overall collective advocacy and campaign to reduce the negative impact of tobacco on the health of Filipinos. “The outstanding results of the GATS affirm that the Philippines has achieved a level of international best practice, with the largest number of smokers that have quit in a short period of time in the Western Pacific. I congratulate the Philippine government, the health and finance departments who have worked together to make this happen.” Dr Weiler said.

The WHO Representative said that the Philippines has achieved one of the most pronounced decreases in prevalence of tobacco use among countries in Asia over the last several years. “While this is truly a great achievement, we need to redouble our efforts and intensify the interventions that have been proven to be effective,” Dr Weiler said.

He reiterated the need to impose smoking bans in public places nationwide and the full implementation of the FCTC, including the tobacco taxation law.

Current data indicate that even as the prevalence of tobacco use in the Philippines has gone down significantly since 2009, the number of Filipinos who smoke is still much higher than in other countries.

Dr Weiler said the WHO will continue to support effort by the Philippine government to reduce the morbidity and mortality among Filipinos linked to tobacco use.

The Philippine Department of Finance (DOF) has been closely monitoring the implementation of the restructured taxation schedule for tobacco products, passed by Congress in 2012.

Finance Assistant Secretary Ma. Teresa Habitan said this particular legislative measure was the first instance in which a flat tax rate was imposed on cigarette products. The assistant secretary said that the law should first be allowed to be fully implemented in order to determine whether it fulfills its objectives to significantly curb smoking prevalence among Filipinos, while generating appropriate revenue for the government at the same time.

“We look forward to more positive outcomes from Republic Act 10351 in the long run,” she said.

Secretary Ubial said the progress and achievements of the tobacco control policies and advocacies should be maximized and pushed further by maintaining the unitary excise tax structure for tobacco products.

“The success of these efforts is living proof that health for all can truly be achieved when all partners work toward the same goal,” Secretary Ubial said.