

# **Minister for Health James Reilly TD**

## **Address to the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety**

Proposed Revision of the Tobacco Products Directive

**February 25, 2013**

I would like to thank the Chair Matthias Groote for the invitation to speak at this hearing and for the opportunity to speak about our efforts in Ireland and Europe to deal with tobacco and the damage caused by smoking.

It's important to take a moment to consider the immense damage that smoking causes and the economic burden it places on Europe.

Approximately 700,000 Europeans die every single year of tobacco related causes. Smoking is the largest avoidable health risk in Europe causing more problems than alcohol, drug abuse and obesity. EU public healthcare expenditure on treating smoking and attributable diseases is estimated at €25.3bn annually and €8.3bn is lost annually in productivity from deaths, absenteeism and early retirement linked to smoking. And that's before you count the cost of the human misery that this habit causes right across all our people.

We're all aware that half of all long term smokers will die from smoking related illnesses. What does this equate to statistically? The World Health Organisation has reported that tobacco caused 100 million deaths in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. If the current trends continue, it would cause up to 1 billion deaths in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We cannot allow this to continue.

A Eurobarometer survey showed that 28% of the EU population smoke. The overall prevalence rates for Ireland are more or less similar to the EU average

with 29% of Irish adults being current smokers. This is simply not acceptable. Nicotine is an immensely addictive substance and once our children and young people become addicted, they are trapped by this addiction. With recent studies showing that 70% of smokers in Europe began smoking before the age of 18, we must act now to make smoking less attractive to our young people. Indeed in a study in Ireland, it was 78% of smokers surveyed said they began smoking before the age of 18, when they were minors.

So what are we doing to alleviate the societal and economic burden placed on us by smoking? What can we do to discourage people from smoking? I have been very public since my appointment as Minister for Health in Ireland, about my commitment to tackle the problem of smoking. Indeed I have indicated that the Tobacco Products Directive is my key priority during the Irish Presidency.

No one measure alone can reduce the number of smokers or the number of our children who start to smoke. A combination of measures is required. This includes effective legislation, comprehensive supports for smokers who are trying to quit and sustained media and education campaigns on the harmful effects of smoking. All these measures have the effect of de-normalising the tobacco use in our society which in my view is the most successful way to prevent future generations from continuing the habit.

The proposed revision of the Tobacco Directive is a key tool in preventing our young people from starting to smoke. As Commissioner Borg has stated previously, the ambition of the proposal is to make tobacco products and smoking less attractive and thus discourage initiation among young people.

The proposal aims to achieve this by placing stricter rules on features that increase the attractiveness of tobacco products, for example, a ban on characterising flavourings. It also proposes to increase the size of the health warnings on the tobacco product packs. As you are aware, the proposal will

address labelling of packaging, ingredients, regulation of nicotine containing products, illicit trade, tracking and tracing system and security features.

My objective during the Irish Presidency is to build consensus and to facilitate agreement among Member States on the proposal so that negotiations can commence with Parliament as soon as possible. As stated earlier, I am personally committed to tackling the problem of smoking and would like to take a moment to discuss Ireland's achievements to date in moving toward a tobacco-free society.

Indeed, I feel the word 'achievement' should be substituted for the word 'progress.' A comprehensive range of tobacco control legislation is in place in Ireland which places us in the top rank of countries internationally. Some of these significant initiatives include:

- The successful implementation of the smoke-free initiative in **2004**
- The ban on the sale of packets of cigarettes of less than 20 in **2007**
- Groundbreaking legislation in **2009** that introduced a ban on in-store display and advertising and the introduction of a retail register.
- A prohibition on self-service vending machines except in licensed premises or in registered clubs
- A ban on the sale of tobacco products to individuals under the age of 18 years
- Cigarette price increases aimed at reducing smoking prevalence and preventing children and adolescents from taking up the habit
- The introduction of graphic warnings on cigarette packs as and from the beginning of this month.

Specifically I believe that the ban on the sale of packs of cigarettes of less than 20, removing the point of sale display and advertising and the introduction of

graphic warnings will have a significant positive impact on our young people in the longer term.

Indeed it is heartening to see that in a recent survey, the number of Irish children who smoke and who are aged between 10 and 17 years of age fell from 18% to 12% from 2002 to 2010. However this figure is still far too high.

The introduction of many successful tobacco control measures in Ireland has been facilitated by developments here at European Union level. It's important that our tobacco policy and legislation framework continues to develop within the context of the European Union.

Further measures being considered in Ireland include a ban on smoking in cars with children present and the extension of the smoking ban to other public areas such as playgrounds, public parks, sports grounds, education and health campuses. What we are trying to achieve is to de-normalise smoking. We will have an opportunity to review progress by all Member States regarding smoke-free environments and tobacco control measures during the health informal in Dublin next month and I do hope that as many of you as can come will be there.

I look forward to hearing your opinions today and to working constructively with you; rapporteur Linda McAvan and the shadow rapporteurs on reaching agreement on this important Directive.

I have discussed the directive with Commissioner Borg and I'm aware of his personal commitment to ensure that this Directive is adopted as quickly as possible.

And we do need to adopt it as quickly as possible because with every year another 700,000 of our citizens are going to die. Our legislative and policy framework must continuously be developed to meet the new and ever evolving

challenges presented to us and I believe the current proposal will prove to be crucial in the battle against tobacco related illnesses in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Parliament.

This is about saving lives. It's about protecting our citizens. And it's about shielding our children from this killer habit.

Thank you.