

Smoking

Time to quit

Even though it is clear how to get people to stop smoking, rates are still rising in many countries—even some in the rich world

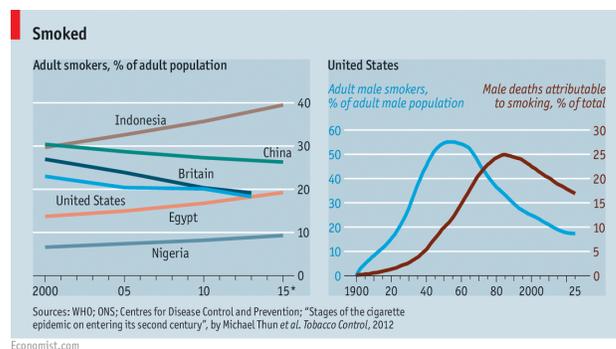
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FOR many Egyptian Muslims it is not the forgoing of food and drink during daylight hours that makes the holy month of Ramadan a difficult time: it is the corresponding restriction on smoking. Take Sayed, the manager of a modest Lebanese restaurant in Cairo. He has not eaten for nearly 16 hours and is surrounded by food. But after the muezzin calls out at sunset, he reaches for a cigarette. So does his staff. Of his 28 employees, only three do not smoke.

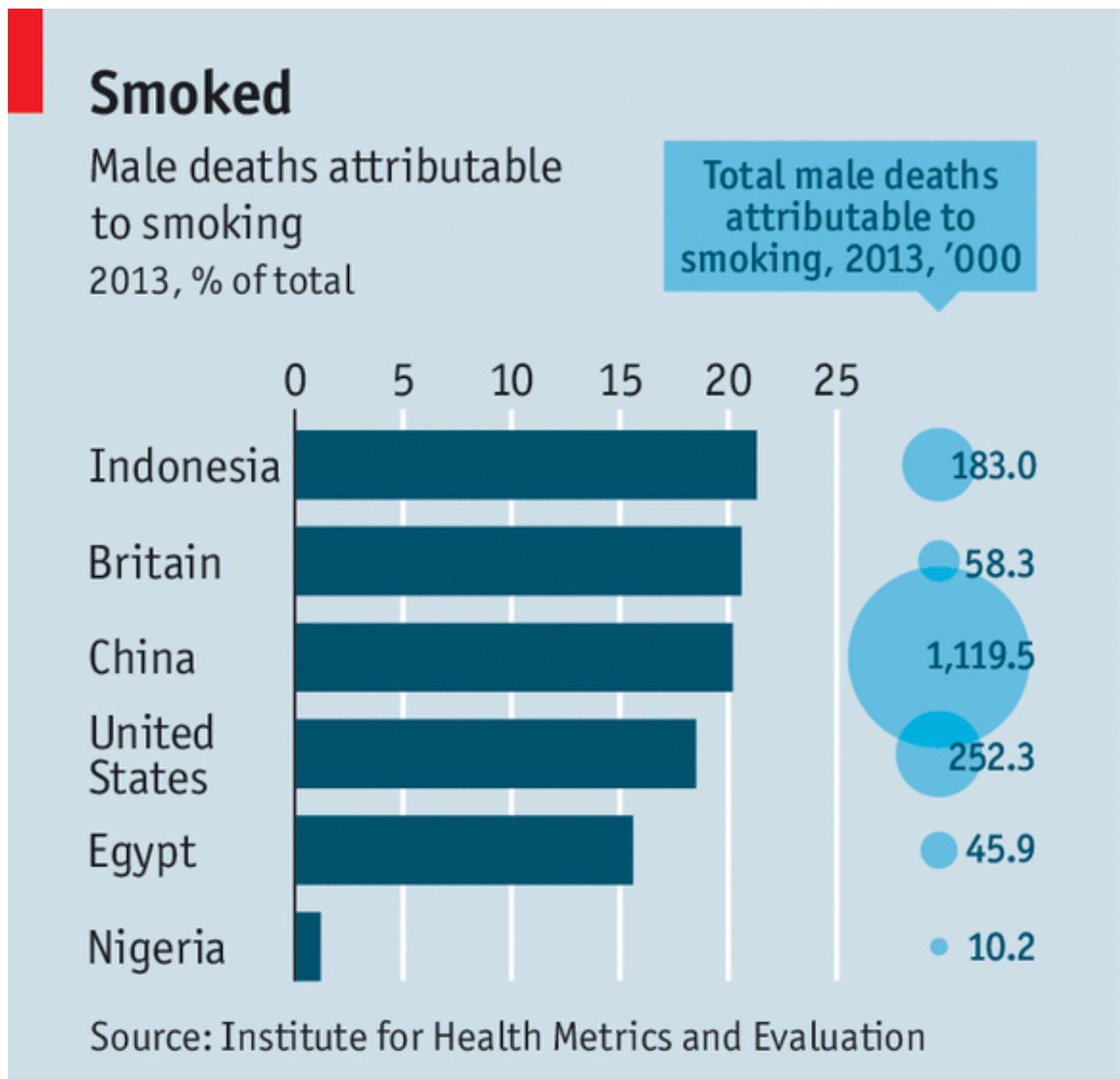


In much of the rich world, smoking seems to be doomed. In America, Australia, Britain, Canada and Italy, one in five or fewer people smoke (see chart). The better-off have mostly given up, and the poor are following. There's a lag between a fall in the smoking rate and a fall in deaths from smoking, but even so in America and many other rich countries, smoking-related deaths are in decline.

But in many poor countries, mostly in Africa, more people are lighting up. According to a World Health Organisation (WHO) projection, a quarter of Nigerian men will smoke by 2025. For tobacco firms, Africa, where smoking rates are still low but incomes increasing fast, is turf worth fighting for. On July 2nd, in a case brought by British American Tobacco, Kenya's High Court suspended the new tobacco rules that would have taken effect last month. They had been eight years in the making. The court found that the constitution required that the company be consulted.



And it is not just in the poor world that rates are



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increasing. In several rich countries, including Belgium, France, Germany, and Portugal, after years of decline, the trend has recently reversed or faltered.

Stub it out

Yet everybody now knows how to get people to quit: hike taxes, ban smoking indoors and advertising, publicise the health risks and help smokers to quit. Countries that follow these steps can see smoking rates fall fast: Uruguay's fell from 33% to 25% in just six years, and the share of Turkish men who smoke fell from 52% to 41% in eight years, after both countries strengthened tobacco control in the past decade.

A report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) published on July 7th finds that only Turkey has imposed and enforces toughly all of those anti-smoking measures. A combination of

tobacco-firm lobbying and inertia hold others back. Yet vast numbers of lives could be saved: in China alone 35m premature deaths will be averted if its smokers start quitting at the rate of Europe, where 30% of those who have ever smoked have quit.

The most effective way to cut smoking is to raise prices by taxing cigarettes heavily. A 10% price increase cuts consumption by 4-5%, half of which is among smokers who quit; the effect is two to three times as large among young people, who have less money. Yet only 33 countries, most of them rich, levy taxes that are more than three-quarters of the retail price, as the WHO recommends. In some parts of America, a smoking habit costs no more as a share of the average income now than in the 1970s.

There are bad reasons for not raising taxes—lobbying from tobacco companies—and good ones—worries that high taxes increase smuggling and are regressive. Tobacco lobbyists, says Prabhat Jha of the University of Toronto, often tell finance ministers in developing countries that raising taxes will boost smuggling so much that they will end up with lower revenues and no health gains. In fact the evidence from France, Mexico, South Africa and several other countries is that revenues rise even as the number of cigarettes smoked falls. Between 2000 and 2012 the proportion of cigarettes sold in Britain that were smuggled fell from 21% to 9%, as the government tightened customs checks at the same time as jacking up taxes.

Many countries levy several tiers of percentage and flat per-stick taxes that depend on the length of cigarettes or other such features, says Vinayak Prasad of the WHO. That allows tobacco firms to tweak their product and keep some brands cheap even as taxes rise, thereby diluting the impact. Setting a minimum price per pack, as several countries, including Brazil and Malaysia, have done in recent years, is the most effective approach.

Tobacco taxes do indeed tend to be regressive. In Britain 33% of manual workers smoke, compared with 15% of professionals and managers; the mentally ill smoke twice as much as everyone else; in some prisons, the rate is as high as 80%. Yet poor smokers are more likely to quit when prices rise, and their families stand to benefit more: in a 2005 survey a quarter of smokers in America and a fifth in Britain admitted spending money on cigarettes that they would otherwise spend on basics such as food and heating.

Health benefits from bans on smoking indoors show up quickly. In several cities across eight countries in Europe and the Americas hospital admissions for heart attacks dropped by an average of 17% in the year after strict smoking bans went into effect; after three years they had fallen by 30%. Scotland saw 18% fewer admissions for childhood asthma in the first year.

But politicians in countries where lots of people smoke worry that bans will be unpopular, and bars and restaurants lobby against them. So loopholes are common, restrictions are usually

brought in bit by bit and enforcement can be half-hearted. When France banned indoor smoking in restaurants in 2008, patios were fitted with canopies. The Greeks and the Portuguese pay little attention to no-smoking rules, the WHO report finds. In Beijing a ban on smoking in some public places, enforced through minimal fines, was ineffective. On June 1st a wider ban, accompanied by stiff fines, went into effect.

Less than 5% of cold-turkey attempts to quit succeed. But cessation services, such as free call-lines, counselling and nicotine patches can double or triple the quit rate—and they pay off. Smokers who give up by the age of 40 gain back nearly all of the ten years of life expectancy that smoking costs. A Danish study found that the lifetime economic gains from quitting aged 35 were around €25,000 (\$27,400) for men and €34,000 for women, of which about two-thirds was from increased productivity.

Technology is cutting the cost of lending would-be quitters a helping hand. In Costa Rica and the Philippines smokers can sign up for automated text messages with tips on behaviour and lifestyle changes that make quitting easier. In a British trial, twice as many of those receiving such messages managed to break the habit than those who did not. Nicotine patches and gum have helped many to quit over the years. Now new nicotine-delivery devices are available, including electronic cigarettes. The market for them is booming, and they help many people quit. In Britain 7% of ex-smokers are using them.

Some fret that smokers who might otherwise be persuaded by anti-smoking rules to quit will mix-and-match instead (vaping indoors and smoking outdoors, for instance). Another fear is that vaping might create a new generation of nicotine addicts. Such fears are overblown, says John Britton of the University of Nottingham: as addictions go, nicotine is no more harmful than caffeine, and electronic cigarettes have far fewer of the harmful chemicals found in conventional ones.

To vape or not to vape?

In the meantime regulations are going in all directions. Many countries treat e-cigarettes just as they do regular cigarettes; some treat them as medical products; and several, including Australia, Brazil, Switzerland and Norway, ban their sale altogether.

Only 29 countries have total bans on tobacco advertising. In Bulgaria, attractive young women may be found offering cigarette promotions in shops and nightclubs. In Pakistan those purchasing some brands are entered in a lottery to win a tractor. Other common mistakes include allowing “light” brands (which are erroneously perceived as healthier), billboards, and point-of-sale advertising.

More countries are now running anti-smoking media campaigns, though quality varies: in the past two years only 39 countries ran campaigns considered top-notch by the WHO. They can be highly effective: 1.6m people tried to quit and 100,000 succeeded as a result of America's "Tips from Former Smokers", which ran in 2012 and showed people crippled by smoking-related disease; it cost \$480 per smoker who quit, which sounds a lot but is greatly outweighed by the benefits. Australia's "sponge" campaign which shows what smokers' lungs soak up was so successful that the tobacco industry tried to get it banned; China, India, Russia and Senegal have all aired it. Graphic images on cigarette packs are in 50 countries and spreading. In Canada, which was the first to introduce them, they cut smoking rates by 3-5 percentage points, according to a recent study that disentangled the effect by comparing with trends in America.

Australia pioneered plain packs in 2012: they come in drab colours with a gory image. Britain, Ireland, and France have also passed plain-pack laws. But Australia and Uruguay are now being sued on the ground that their rules on how packs should look like violate trade agreements. Malaysia is seeking a tobacco exemption in trade negotiations between America and Asia, for fear that an eventual treaty could be used in a similar way to curb its anti-smoking efforts. In March the charities of Michael Bloomberg and Bill and Melinda Gates, which have spent lavishly on anti-smoking efforts since 2007, launched a fund that will pay the legal fees of low- and middle-income countries in such cases.

While some countries are dawdling, others are mulling tougher rules. Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland have set themselves deadlines to bring smoking to less than 5% in the next decade or two. Finland aims to become nicotine-free by 2040. A bill to ban tobacco sales to anyone born after 2000 is being considered by the Australian state of Tasmania.

America's public-health authorities are considering a regulation that would set nicotine levels so low that cigarettes are not addictive. Smokers would get their nicotine fix from e-cigarettes and the like. A related concept that has been suggested by academics is to increase cigarettes' acidity so as to make smoking unpleasant. A "sinking-lid" supply strategy has been floated in New Zealand: gradually reducing tobacco sales to zero. That seems implausible, for the same reason that governments have never been able to stamp out heroin-injecting. But the damage from death sticks can be greatly reduced.

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