



Press Release

25 May 2023

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA and partners join hands in highlighting the dangers of Tobacco Smoking

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA (HSFSA) is partnering with global, national and regional partners such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), Public Health, the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA), the National Council Against Smoking (NCAS), the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), the South African Tobacco Free Youth Forum (SATFYF), the African Tobacco Industry Monitoring & Policy Research Unit (ATIM), the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and Protect Our Next (PON) in sending a clear message out to the public and encouraging zero tobacco use and zero use of electronic devices.

Tobacco farming should stop but fruit and vegetable farming should take priority. World No Tobacco Day (WNTD), initiated by WHO as a way of highlighting the harms of tobacco smoking, is commemorated annually on the 31st May. Each year the WHO selects a theme for the day to ensure a global unified message. The theme for 2023 is ***“We need food, not tobacco.”*** The WHO and public health partners all over the world aim to raise awareness that land is increasingly being used for tobacco growing in low- and middle-income countries, reducing the amount of land that could be used for crops to nourish people through supplying more healthy foods.

“The tobacco industry produces and markets products that damage the environment, kill millions of people prematurely, rob households of finances that could have been used for food and education, and impose immense healthcare costs on families, communities and countries,” says Dr. Sharon Nyatsanza of the National Council Against Smoking. “It’s time for South Africa to implement stronger tobacco control policies to urgently reduce the impact of tobacco on our health and economy.”

The HSFSA and their consortium partners urge South Africans to stop smoking tobacco as one of the best things they can do for their heart and brain health. It is estimated that about 31 000 South Africans die annually as a result of tobacco-related diseases (SAMRC). At the same time, we urge leaders to monitor health inequities and to ensure that all people are able to access safe, nutritious food, a healthier environment, quality health services and other human rights.

According to the WHO, around 3.5 million hectares of land are converted for tobacco growing across the globe each year. The growth of tobacco also contributes to deforestation of 200 000 hectares a year. Tobacco growing requires the heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers, which contribute to soil degradation. As tobacco depletes soil fertility it lowers the capacity of the soil to grow other crops. Compared with other agricultural activities such as maize growing and even livestock grazing, tobacco farming has a far more destructive impact on ecosystems as tobacco farmlands are more prone to desertification.

Any profits to be gained from tobacco as a cash crop may not offset the damage done to sustainable food production in low- and middle-income countries. Against this background, the WHO urges the need to take legal measures to reduce tobacco growing and help farmers to move into the production of alternative food crops.

The WHO also addresses the livelihood of tobacco farmers. The intensive handling of insecticides and toxic chemicals during the cultivation of tobacco contributes to many farmers and their families suffering from ill health. The WHO further states that unfair contractual arrangements with tobacco companies keep farmers impoverished, and the child labour that is often woven into tobacco cultivation interferes with the right to education and is a violation of human rights.

Nine of the 10 largest tobacco cultivators are low- and middle-income countries, and 4 of these are defined as low-income food-deficit countries. In several low- and middle-income countries, the percentage of cultivable land dedicated to tobacco growing has recently increased, resulting in the steady increase in tobacco crop yield. Further to this, although tobacco leaf production has been increasing on the African continent, cigarette production appears to be shifting to the Asian continent. Land used to grow tobacco could be more efficiently used to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2 – zero hunger.

Prof. Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa emphasises the following, “As a passionate protector of children and young people, we will continue to push the agenda to ban all forms of tobacco smoking in public and in private, particularly around vulnerable groups with less power in decision - making such as children and young people. Together with our anti-tobacco lobby groups, we are determined to reduce tobacco use and call on those in various sectors such as Treasury and the National Department of Health (NDOH) to refine tobacco smoking policies and pass the new Tobacco Control Bill. This will protect the health and increase the quality of life of all South Africans.

Tobacco smoke contributes to air and environmental pollution resulting in poor health outcomes including heart disease, lung disease, cancer, strokes and upper respiratory illnesses. Tobacco is so harmful that not only does direct usage of tobacco impact our

bodies, but second-hand smoke (SHS), or passive smoking, is when a non-smoker inhales the cigarette smoke of a smoker, is a major risk to health.

Exposure to SHS is dangerous, as it is also associated with increased risk of heart disease and numerous adverse health effects, even among children and unborn babies, and causes substantial mortality and morbidity globally. Children exposed to SHS are at higher risk of developing lower respiratory infection, including TB and have a higher risk of suffering the onset of asthma, pneumonia, bronchitis and middle ear infections (Zar et al). In many populations, homes are the main place of exposure to SHS for women and children and it is the responsibility of countries to implement and enforce comprehensive smoke-free laws to protect their populations.

E-cigarettes are also popularised and glamorized on social media, placing young people at risk of initiating use.

Tobacco is highly addictive, can affect your health, negatively impact second-hand smokers and damage our environment. The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa has an ongoing campaign that aims to bring down tobacco related deaths by:

- Encouraging members of the public to make it a top priority to avoid tobacco use, don't start smoking
- If you already smoke, to quit
- Discouraging young people from smoking
- Educating members of the public on the dangers of smoking
- Raising awareness of the harmful effects of second-hand smoke
- Continuing to advocate for the Control of Tobacco and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill
- Referring smokers to get help or advice for cessation of tobacco use.

We also encourage members of the public to follow guidelines in order to avoid second-hand smoke:

- Do not allow smokers to smoke around your family
- Make your home, workplace and community smoke-free
- Request for visitors not to smoke in your home
- Do not go to places where smoking is allowed
- Help smokers to quit

The Foundation will continue in its efforts to advocate for a healthier environment and joins WHO in its commitment to ensuring that everyone can realize the right to good health, support the voluntary targets for prevention of premature deaths from Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD's), which includes a 30% relative reduction in adult smoking prevalence and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2 – zero hunger.

WNTD 2023 will serve as an opportunity to mobilize governments and policymakers to support farmers to switch to sustainable crops through creating market ecosystems for alternative crops and encourage at least 10 000 farmers globally to commit to shifting away from tobacco growing.

These crops will feed their families and millions more on a global scale, help them break free of the vicious debt-ridden cycle of tobacco growing, and support a healthier environment overall. The campaign will also support governments in developing suitable policies, strategies and enabling market conditions for the tobacco growing farmers to shift to growing food crops.

(ENDS)

Interviews will be conducted by our clinical team, in the Health Promotions Programme, Dietitians and our CEO, Professor Pamela Naidoo and other consortium partners. To co-ordinate and confirm interview dates you are welcome to contact Themba Mzondi, our PR and Communications Officer on 021 422 1586 / 0781135216 or email themba.mzondi@heartfoundation.co.za

About the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) plays a leading role in the fight against preventable heart disease and stroke, with the aim of seeing fewer people in South Africa suffer premature deaths and disabilities. The HSFSA, established in 1980 is a non-governmental, non-profit organization which relies on external funding to sustain the work it carries out.

The HSFSA aims to reduce the cardiovascular disease (CVD) burden in South Africa and ultimately on the health care system of South Africa. Our mission is to empower people in South Africa to adopt healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices easier, seek appropriate care and encourage prevention.

For more information visit www.heartfoundation.co.za. You can also find us on www.facebook.com/HeartStrokeSA, www.twitter.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa