



4. Discussion

The target of obtaining 500 completed questionnaires for each of the nine provinces was achieved in seven of the nine provinces. School response rates in Kwa-Zulu Natal and North West Province (66.7% and 52.6% respectively) were low. It must be noted that the study took place only five years after the first democratic election, a time period too short to have completely redressed the infrastructural imbalances of the past. Reasons for low school response rates in some provinces are reflective of these imbalances, such as certain schools lacked telecommunication and some schools were inaccessible by road to survey administrators. In addition, time constraints experienced by educators in attempting to complete the formal curriculum, was another reason cited for non-participation. Despite the low school response rate, both the provincial samples in Kwa-Zulu Natal and North West Province were in close proximity of the targeted number due to the larger than expected class sizes and better than expected learner participation rates. It must be highlighted that the school response rate in the Northern Province and the Western Cape reached figures of 100% and 95% respectively.

This multi-country study targeted adolescents with an age range of 13 – 15 years. In South Africa (SA), this age range ought to correspond to Grade 8 – 10 learners. However, only 42.9% of the sample fell within this age range and in fact 47.6% of the learners were 16 years or older. This can be accounted for by the legacy of years of Apartheid education that was characterised by a lack of schools, limited access to schools, as well as late entry and re-entry into the education system. It is noteworthy that significant percentages of learners (16.5%) did not know where to place themselves within the historical "race" categorisation used in SA. Possible reasons may include lack of understanding of the question, reluctance to place themselves into racial categories or that they were unaware of the racial categorisation system that was used in SA.

Just under half of the learners sampled in the study had tried a cigarette even if it was one or two puffs. Males were significantly more likely than females to have ever tried a cigarette. Greater percentages of learners in Grade 9 and

10 ever smoked cigarettes when compared to Grade 8 learners. This trend correlated with the percentage of learners who smoked on 20 or more days in the past 30 days (current frequent smokers). Grade 8 learners and younger should therefore form the target of prevention programmes with cessation activities targeted at older adolescents. Despite the significantly lower prevalence of ever smokers within the "Black/African" category, when compared to "Coloured" and "White" learners, more "Black/African" learners first smoked cigarettes before the age of 10. This trend points towards a potential increase in prevalence of cigarette use among "Black/African" adolescents in the near future, warranting a focussed prevention approach for this community. The significantly higher prevalence of ever smokers in the Western Cape could be accounted for by the predominant "Coloured" population group who also displayed the highest prevalence of ever smokers nationally.

Twenty three percent of Grade 8 – 10 learners nationally smoked cigarettes on one or more days in the past 30 days preceding the survey. This implies that almost a quarter of these learners were current users of cigarettes. This figure among adolescents closely parallels the 24% smoking rate of adults as reported by the SADHS.¹⁶ The fact that South African adolescents and adults are smoking at similar rates points towards a growing tobacco epidemic among the younger generations of the South African population. This correlates with the extensive and glamorous tobacco advertising and sponsorship that occurred in developing countries, like SA, over the past ten years.¹⁸ Considering the financial implications of tobacco-related morbidity and mortality, and that most tobacco-related illnesses affect tobacco users when they are economically productive,¹⁹ South Africa would do well to prevent its youth from becoming adult smokers. The SA Tobacco Control Amendment Act of 1999 with one of its fundamental pillars aimed at protecting the youth, provides an excellent point of departure. Although significantly more males than females are current users of cigarettes, almost equal percentages smoked their first cigarette before the age of 10. This implies that South African females are following the worldwide trend of increasing smoking rates amongst the female population.²⁰

The fact that significantly more younger learners are current users of cigarettes than older learners, and that Grade 8 learners were significantly more likely to have smoked their first cigarette before the age of 10 when compared to Grade 9 learners, points towards the decreasing age of initiation of cigarette use. This is further supported by almost one fifth of the sample nationally having tried their first cigarette before the age of ten. "Coloured" learners displayed the highest prevalence of current cigarette use which was significantly higher than that of "Black/African" learners. This trend mirrors the results obtained from previous adults surveys which showed higher prevalence of cigarette use for "Coloured" adults and lower prevalence of cigarette use for "Black/African" adults.^{11,16}

Besides using cigarettes, many adolescents in SA are using various other tobacco products such as smokeless tobacco (snuff and chewing tobacco), cigars, pipes etc. Again the younger age group reported significantly higher usage of other tobacco products. An analysis by "race" demonstrated that "Black/African" learners displayed the highest usage of other tobacco products. This implies that tobacco control interventions should not focus solely on cigarette use but should encompass all types of tobacco use. There is a need to explore the determinants of the usage of other tobacco products particularly amongst "Black/African" adolescents as a means to develop targeted and tailored interventions.

The current tobacco legislation bans the sale of cigarettes to minors. Almost two thirds of current smokers were not refused cigarettes because of their age when they purchased them in a store. These findings indicate one of two possibilities: that retailers are not aware of the legislation or that they are aware of it but fail to implement the legislation. Several years have passed since underage sales were banned yet this law has not been successfully implemented. In light of the enactment of more comprehensive legislation, there is urgent need to create awareness of the law and its regulations,²¹ to find suitable mechanisms to enforce the law and ensure that transgressors of the law are prosecuted. This implies that a more comprehensive approach, addressing both individual and environmental determinants, is

necessary to limit underage tobacco sales. "White" current smokers were most likely to be able to purchase their own cigarettes in a store without being refused because of their age. This difference in access according to "racial" lines requires further investigation. Considering that current smokers were able to recruit other persons, in some cases an older person, to purchase their cigarettes, points to the need for interventions to extend beyond adolescents to include the community at large. The ban on the free distribution of cigarettes is timeous in curbing easy access of cigarettes to underage adolescents.

A significant percentage of current smokers expressed a desire to stop smoking with equal numbers making an attempt to stop smoking. This finding is reflective of a similar trend internationally.^{22,23,24,25} It is encouraging that greater numbers of younger current smokers expressed a desire to stop smoking, for research has shown that those who start smoking at a younger age experience more difficulty in quitting.^{26,27} Significantly greater "Black/African" current smokers than "White" smokers expressed a desire to stop smoking, perhaps indicative of cultural factors that disfavour smoking in the community where these adolescents live. Even though the learners try to stop but fail, a large percentage of them expressed high self-efficacy to stop smoking. Like their western counterparts, South African adolescent smokers underestimate the addictive nature of nicotine⁴ and the challenging process involved in trying to quit. The need for a cigarette first thing in the morning is one of several factors used to measure dependency on nicotine. Just over 20% of current smokers reported needing a cigarette first thing in the morning. Smoking cessation for adolescents is an under-researched field internationally.^{28,29} Considering that these adolescents wish to stop smoking and fail when trying as well as displayed signs of addiction, calls for focussed interventions to assist them to stop smoking.

International research shows that tobacco advertising targets and influences the smoking patterns of youth.^{30,31} A significant proportion of adolescents in this study have been exposed to tobacco advertising in magazines, newspapers and on billboards. The inclusion of an advertising ban in the latest tobacco control legislation

in South Africa is therefore justified as the best strategy to protect future generations. A diverse marketing strategy directed at the youth has been used by the tobacco industry in SA as indicated by the results of this study. This included conventional advertising in the print media, distribution of free cigarettes as well as the distribution of items with a cigarette logo on it. Current smokers were more likely than never smokers to own something with a logo on it. There is evidence to show that owning something with a cigarette logo on it increases one's susceptibility of becoming a smoker.^{30,31} The use of this marketing strategy has been banned by the new tobacco legislation in SA. The study demonstrates that "White" learners were exposed to tobacco advertising in the print media and on billboards to a greater extent, probably indicative of their increased level of exposure when compared to other "race" groups. A positive finding was that equal percentages of current and never smokers favoured a ban of smoking in public places.

About twice as many current smokers than never smokers were exposed to someone else's smoke in their homes or in places other than their homes in their presence in seven days preceding the survey. This implies that current smokers, as well as those who smoke around them, require health education on the effects of active smoking on themselves and the effects of environmental tobacco smoke on others. As people become aware of the dangers of environmental tobacco smoke, they will become empowered to respond to others smoking in their presence and thereby contribute to making non-smoking a desirable social norm.

"Coloured" never smokers were exposed to second hand smoke to a greater extent, both in and outside of their homes in the past seven days preceding the survey, which correlates with the high prevalence of smoking both among "Coloured" adolescents and adults.¹⁶ Only about 50% of current and never smokers in the study favoured a ban of smoking in public places. In addition, similar percentages of them definitely thought that smoke from others was harmful. It can be extrapolated that the low perception of the need to ban smoking in public places is strongly correlated to the lack of knowledge of the harmful effects of environmental tobacco smoke.

The level of smoking-related issues covered in the school curriculum was low. This finding is also reflected in the data by the low levels of awareness about the harmful effects of environmental tobacco smoke together with the low percentage of learners who expressed the need to ban smoking in public places. The data reveals that when tobacco-related issues are taught, they are more likely to be covered in a single Grade instead of being covered consistently through all Grades. This lack of reinforcement of the message to prevent and stop tobacco-use, does not augur well for learners as they are exposed to strong social and environmental influences to smoke.