

DISCUSSION

The general situation of tobacco use among young people all over the world, and in less developed countries like Uganda in particular shows that young people are at a high health risk, not only as users but non-users exposed to environmental tobacco smoke. This is also attributed to the direct and indirect advertisements of tobacco products. The GYTS a school-based survey conducted in Uganda among secondary school students (Senior One-Senior Three) 13-15 age group presents the magnitude of the problem.

The prevalence rate of ever-smokers (a cigarette, even one or two puff) among students aged 13-15 years is high in all the districts (Arua 33.1%, Kampala 17.5%, Mpigi 18.2% and 12.6% in Rest of Central), with initiation age at less than 10 years. Current smokers account for 21.9% in Arua, 5.3% in Kampala, 6.7% in Mpigi and 4.7% in Rest of Central Districts. Yet, it is widely known that tobacco is the leading cause of preventable deaths in the world. Cigarette smoking is responsible for cancer of the lungs, mouth, esophagus and bladder, heart and respiratory diseases. The current trend predicts an increase in tobacco use among young people. This is attributed to the early age of trying to smoke, which develops into a habit difficult to quit. As indicated by over 70% current smokers who had tried to stop smoking in the past year preceding the survey but failed. Many young people tend to ignore the consequences of such risk-taking tendencies like tobacco use especially the addictiveness and premature death from tobacco related illnesses.

From the survey, high levels of tobacco use among students in Arua (33.1%) are attributed to the factor that tobacco is grown there, which makes it readily accessible and available.

In Uganda many people consider tobacco use among adolescents as an unhealthy social habit. To young people however, smoking is perceived as a tool to fit in with their peers who are also looking for social identity. For example, almost one in three of the students thought boys who smoke have more friends. In addition, over 60% thought smoking makes one lose weight. Research has shown that physical appearance especially looking thin/small among adolescent girls is of vital importance and valued more than any other lifestyle factor. Many start to smoke cigarettes with hope to lose weight ignoring the effects of its use. Such perceptions and attitudes towards smoking tend to potential grounds for peer pressure to use tobacco products. It is also increasingly evident that young people who are involved in such a health-risk behavior do it collectively and not as social isolates. Hence, peer groups are considered a critical factor in initiation and maintenance of adolescent smoking.

Although some health education programs within which tobacco effects is a component do exist, they are not specifically targeting the young people. Information is diffused with contradicting messages, which portray positive images of smoking and using tobacco products. These images are portrayed through advertisements in the media, on billboards, at public events and other means like concerts-street bashes. Cigarette smoking is a very powerful influence, especially when an adolescent model is promoting the product. Smoking is glamorized in the movies and television and often associated with modern life, sports, outdoor events and having fun. For example, with common advertisement slogans like: **Rex-the test of success; Safari-your best companion; Sportsman-Yee Ssebo; Embassy-smooth all the way** the youths are made to believe that smoking is 'cool', modern and foreign encourages them to smoke too. Students in Arua, Kampala, Mpigi and Rest of Central are exposed to both types of messages because of access to newspapers and popular FM radios.

Legislation on tobacco control is necessary but if it is not enforced it is useless. Enforcement of tobacco control policies enhances their efficacy both by deterring violators and sending a message to public that the community leadership believes the policies are important. Numerous studies have shown that the combination of enforcing laws that restrict tobacco sales to young people and sensitizing the public can reduce illegal sales of tobacco to minors. In Uganda like elsewhere this restriction does not seem feasible. The survey indicates that six in ten of current smokers in the districts of Arua, Kampala and Rest of Central Districts were not refused to purchase cigarettes because of their age. Similarly, research has shown that apart from accessing tobacco products from commercial outlets, young people tend use other channels like friends, older people to get access to tobacco product. Therefore, increased taxation on tobacco products could be an effective measure to reduce consumption and access of tobacco products to adolescents through social networks/channels yet also raise government revenue.

Efforts to ban smoking in public places are evident at NGO and individual levels. Some service providers have banned smoking in their premises by putting up '**No smoking**' stickers and signs. However, these efforts to prevent second-hand smoking or environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) exposure are not being supported at the policy level. The Environmental Action Network (TEAN) for example, in 2001 filed a suit in the High Court of Uganda; seeking declarations that smoking in public places violated non-smokers constitutional rights to a clean and healthy environment and to life. This was only recognized as a right on December 11, 2002, where the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) was ordered to make regulations. The findings of the survey showed that a high percentage of the youths were exposed to ETS both at home and public places. Despite the awareness level of the obvious harmful effects of

second-hand smoking among the youths, only half were in favor of banning smoking in public places.

School environment is important for the building of a health foundation of a child. It also forms part of the hidden curriculum of the school like tobacco use prevention education. Smoking prevention education programs that focus on life skill training have proven effective in reducing tobacco use and other substance abuse among adolescents. From the survey, over 3/4 of the students in Arua, and nearly 2/3 of the students in Kampala, Mpigi and Rest of Districts had been taught effects of tobacco use in class. However, the Ugandan school curriculum does not specifically have tobacco and drug use as a topic/lesson, often speakers are visited to the school to sensitize the students. School clubs like Red Cross, Debate and Drama are also used as agents of health education. In many Ugandan schools, cigarette smoking is considered bad behavior punishable by suspension or expulsion. This can be influential to adolescent behavior.