

## **Prohibition through the hookah looking-glass.**

Kamal Chaouachi (TICAP, The Hague, 15 March 2010)

Tobacco use is dangerous and for this reason it should be studied with unfailing scientific rigour. Hookah (shisha, narghile) is the pre-Colombian method of smoking whose growing popularity across the world has been targeted by antismoking activists for almost one decade now. However, few of them have noted that such a popularity is also a backlash effect of the vehement anti-cigarette campaigns of the past two decades which led many of its users to consider any available supposedly less harmful alternative.

When hookah smoking emerged as a new global trend, the same fear-arousing strategy used against cigarettes was blindly implemented. Because antismoking researchers tend to avoid scientific discussions and quail at complex objects of research, they simply decided that cigarettes and hookah were, from a chemical and health viewpoint, not very different. From there, they wounded up treading on scientific integrity after they advertised such equivalences as: 1 hookah session equals 20, 40, 100, 200 and even 900 cigarettes. Such statements have been published in supposedly peer-reviewed biomedical journals, including traditionally well-regarded ones. As in the case of the offensive on cigarette smokers, the mainstream media played their usual sound box role.

While independent studies showed how the hazards of Environmental Tobacco Smoke from cigarettes (visible side-stream smoke) have been hyped in line with a prohibition agenda, public health national agencies went so far as resorting to fake posters showing hookahs emitting huge clouds of side-stream smoke, therefore representing an apparently great threat to exposed non-smokers. Once again, few observers noted that a hookah generates almost no side-stream smoke...

While a well-identified problem related to hookahs is the possible misuse of charcoal, most international "public health" experts (those from the WHO to start with) have never issued a single recommendation regarding the importance of ventilation (at home, in a tea-house, etc.) or the quality of the diverse types of charcoal. For them, hookah use must be eradicated and harm reduction options, as for cigarettes, are simply irrelevant. The consequences of such a misconduct have hampered the emergence of an efficient preventive education for the benefit of millions. Fortunately, only but a few cases of CO poisoning have been reported in biomedical journals.

Leaving aside the classical unsubstantiated scare about lung cancer when it comes to hookah smoking, world "water-pipe" experts have recently tried to establish the high addictive potential of the weird pipes. Their latest findings show that one 45 minute shisha smoking session does not deliver more nicotine than 1 cigarette...

As a bottom line, antismoking groups cannot accept that any modern or traditional product (smokeless tobacco, Eclipse cigarette, hookahs and even the E-cigarette based on the hookah principle) be less hazardous than the classical cigarette because the latter does represent the harm reference. Should they endorse the principle of harm reduction in this field, this would imply that the whole infrastructure they have built, thanks to public money in particular (\*), would become useless and doomed to a sort of apoptosis.

Antismoking activists have gone too far, first of all by twisting the original meaning of "tobacco control". Their confrontational approach to prevention has generated a growing reaction that psycho-sociologists describe as an attack on the very individual identity in the case of cigarette smokers. In the case of hookah smoking, there is also a collective identity because of its important sociological, anthropological and historical dimensions. For this reason and the above-mentioned ones, prohibition is, once again in History, doomed to collapse. The quickest way to reach this healthy event is that advocates of scientific integrity in studies on cigarette and hookah smoking in particular, stand united. In this respect, antismoking groups have one great quality : their degree of organisation.

(\*) The author has been, at times between years 2000 and 2007, an active member of the world antismoking Globalink network sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry (Pfizer in particular). This organisation counts some 6,000 members working with : ministries of health; antismoking NGOs; the World Health Organisation and its relevant bodies (TobReg, the Study Group for the Regulation of Tobacco Products; the “Tobacco Free Initiative”; the regional bureaux; etc.); the Cochrane Review Tobacco Addiction Group; etc. Globalink also maintains strong links with the main antismoking journals: “Tobacco Control” most importantly; “Nicotine and Tobacco Research”; “Addiction”; some US biomedical journals which regularly publish articles on tobacco issues, etc. Since some views expressed in the present address could perhaps be seen as influenced by such an experience, its author wishes to confirm that they exclusively rely on the available peer-reviewed world scientific literature.