Advocacy for Ban on Gutka: Voice of the Victims Campaign

A Case Study

Ashima Sarin, Dr. Pankaj Chaturvedi, Dr. Prakash C. Gupta, Shahin Khan

Statistics about the disease consequences of tobacco use are mind boggling. It is estimated that in the 21st century, a billion people would die early because of tobacco use. In India, it is estimated through scientific studies at the national level that nearly a million deaths occur every year due to tobacco use. Going by these statistics, restricting tobacco use or taking necessary steps to reduce its usage should logically be one of the highest priorities in public health. This is, however, clearly not so. A major reason for quite a bit of apathy and inaction on tobacco control is that statistics get treated merely as statistics; the human face of suffering is completely lost in the constructs of the statistics and strong scientific evidence.

An effective way of sensitizing a policymaker or a public luminary to the cause of tobacco control might be is to take that person on a tour of a hospital ward among patients with diseases caused by tobacco. Specially, the head and neck cancer ward in a cancer hospital, because 90% of these cancers are caused by tobacco use. But it is obviously not feasible to take policymakers and media personnel through this process for gaining their support for tobacco control.

But, on the other hand, there are patients, who upon learning about tobacco's role in causing their disease and suffering, often want to give a message to others. Because, in addition to their personal suffering, their families, including spouses, parents
and children suffer much more for a longer time. They, however, have no platform to broadcast their message. As they are already drained, physically, emotionally and economically, there is no way they can create a platform on their own.

The campaign 'Voice of Tobacco Victims' (VoTV) is an attempt to provide a platform to these patients and their family members who want to share their story with a wider audience. It is easy to use this approach to create awareness regarding the hazards of tobacco use. Most importantly, the difference this campaign makes is that it channelizes victims’ messages towards specific tobacco control policy objectives so that they do not remain merely awareness generating exercises. This platform almost always includes senior policymakers and media as the audience. The doctors who have treated the patients are also a part of the platform for two reasons - one, to reassure the victims and secondly, to provide scientific backing to the statements made by the victims. In the VoTV campaign, these doctors are referred to as ‘patrons.’ The campaign coordinators remain in the background with relevant research data and evidence on the effectiveness of the policies demanded by the victims.

Dear Minister Uncle, we almost lost our dad.... you don’t know how painful was the entire experience.... he had mouth cancer because of Pan Masala chewing.... we do not want this to happen to any child in India

Children of Ashish Jain (9425173999) Satna, MP

My father was addicted to the Gutka even after knowing the consequences... simply because it was available in every nook and corner.... my Family’s sincere request to you to BAN this Life threatening product.

Sanjoli, Daughter of Manoj (09300006895), Bhopal, MP

I lost my husband... he had mouth cancer following 12 years of Gutka/pan masala chewing.... I see no reason why it cannot be Banned when so much of information is already there.... how can government be so insensitive....

Alka (9410132384) wife of late Rajeev Pandey, Dehradoon, Uttaranchal

Despite being an advocate, I thought Gutka was mouth freshner.... I had mouth cancer... lost my half jaw.... can’t speak and eat properly....living under constant fear of disease coming back.... how long will this society live under this threat to life?

Manoj Mishra (9415369350), Advocate, Allahabad.

...Many more such victims
Described below are some events which were a big success of the VoTV campaign:

- The first event was organized in Mumbai on World No Tobacco Day, 31st May 2008, where Dr. Pankaj Chaturvedi presented 10 cancer patients and their stories. The experiment proved immensely successful and the patients shocked the media and audience with their grit and determination. The message “This is what tobacco did to us, we want to save others!” evoked an emotional response which led to widespread media coverage.

- Cancer patients in their capacity as VoTV members wrote letters to celebrities who endorse tobacco products. These letters were covered by media leading gradually to a drastic decline in celebrity endorsements.

- A VoTV meeting held in New Delhi in collaboration with other public health organizations in February 2011 with Cabinet Minister, the junior Health Minister and senior bureaucrats focused media attention on the launch of a national campaign against smokeless tobacco.

- In March 2011, VoTV held a meeting in New Delhi with the Leader of the Opposition in the Lower House and about 40 Members of Parliament (MPs). The event received a lot of media coverage and provided a very significant opportunity for strong advocacy among MPs (Members of Parliament) for support on action against smokeless tobacco.

- VoTV Patrons conducted a campaign around World No Tobacco Day, 31 May 2011, which resulted in Chief Ministers of 11 Indian States, one Deputy Chief Minister, three Governors & many Ministers and administrators to pledge their support to curb the tobacco menace in their states. These received

---

**TMH docs move against tobacco**

Parliamentarians sign pledge to ensure pictorial warnings on tobacco products

*Parliamentarians sign pledge to ensure pictorial warnings on tobacco products.*

**Santosh Andhale**

*Doctors from the Tata Memorial Hospital took 50 cancer patients from the city to meet opposition leader in the Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj, in Delhi last week. It was enforcing the new rule of pictorial warning on tobacco products, which came into effect on May 31, 2009. Swaraj called 50 parliamentarians from different political parties to listen to the grievances of the cancer victims at the meeting. After the meeting, all the parliamentarians signed a pledge saying that they will ensure that the pictorial warning will get printed on tobacco products.*

*After meeting the delegation, Swaraj said on Twitter: “I stand for a complete ban on all tobacco products. If the government is not ready to ban them immediately, we must ensure that pictorial warnings are more prominent and strict compliance is ensured.”*

*“For the last one year, we have been fighting with the government to enforce the pictorial warning on all tobacco products, but nothing has happened. Now, to raise our voice in the Lok Sabha, we met Sushma. We have asked for her help in banning gutkas increasing taxation on all tobacco products and implementing policies and programmes that reflect the demands of victims of tobacco,” said Dr Pankaj Chaturvedi, associate professor, head and neck department, Tata Memorial Hospital.*

*Apart from the doctors, NGOs such as Health Sakkariya Institute for Public Health, Salaam Bombay Foundation and Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) were present at the meeting on March 17.*

*He added, “We are happy in spite of the Parliament session being in progress, Sushma met us and listened to the stories of cancer patients. She assured us that she will raise the issue in the Lok Sabha and try to get the government to enforce the rule.”*
media coverage nationally and in the states. The campaign also led to strong policy action in many of the States.

- In November 2011, under Save the Future Campaign, three Chief Ministers and three Health Ministers of states pledged their support to effectively implement Section 6 (prohibition of sale of tobacco products within 100 yards of educational institutions) of The Cigarettes and Other Products Act (COTPA).

- The VoTV network took a Bombay High Court Order to ban hookah and punitive action against smoke-free violations in restaurants to 10 State capital cities. This led to adoption of a similar policy in at least three of those cities.

- The United States Secretary of HHS (Health & Human Services), Kathleen Sebelius, during a visit to India, attended a VoTV event. She was highly moved and informed that CDC along with the ACS (American Cancer Society) is planning to embark on a similar campaign in the USA. This paid TV campaign is slated to begin in the US in mid-March 2012.

- VoTV events have also been held for innumerable policymakers across the country to obtain their support for raising taxes on tobacco products, both smoking and smokeless in a number of states.

**Evaluation**

There has been no formal evaluation of the VoTV campaign as yet. However, this unique initiative has demonstrated its ability to create an emotional connect with policymakers and get them to take action on tobacco control. It provides a much-needed face to tobacco control, reminding policymakers that this is a crucial public health issue which needs to be dealt with urgently through policy advancement, implementation and enforcement. Overall, the VoTV campaign has resulted in tax increase on tobacco products in 11 states, and many other advancements in terms of stronger implementation and enforcement of tobacco control laws have also taken place.

**Way Forward**

The VoTV initiative serves as an extremely effective platform for gaining commitment from policymakers as well as to reach out to media to create awareness among tobacco consumers, both potential and existing. The campaign also involves other public health organizations, NGOs and social activists and a joint effort will continue to ensure commitment from political leaderships in support of developing a comprehensive tobacco control programme all over India.

**References**


**Acknowledgements**

Dr. Surendra Shastri, Patients, Action Council Against Tobacco, Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, Salaam Bombay Foundation and Voluntary Health Association of India.

**About the Authors**

- Dr. Pankaj Chaturvedi is Professor & Associate Surgeon, Department of Surgical Oncology, Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai
- Dr. Prakash C. Gupta is Director, Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, Navi Mumbai
- Ashima Sarin is Project Director, Voice of Tobacco Victims, Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, Gurgaon
- Shahin Khan is Project Coordinator, Voice of Tobacco Victims, Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, Navi Mumbai