



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

TOBACCO USE

(21st March 2003)

abstract

The NBC believes that tobacco use – defined as an addiction characterised by a high degree of dependency – owing to its extent, seriousness and social cost, as well as the strength of the interests at stake, is one of the great problems facing modern society, not only does it have ethical, health and social implications but it also affects the economy and employment.

From a bioethical standpoint, the NBC focuses its attention on the “gift” of health which is safeguarded as a fundamental human right and, as such, guaranteed by the Italian constitution. The health of the smoker and the non-smoker are both called into question; equally involved are the principle of self-determination and the detection of a settable limit that distinguishes the individual’s unquestionable and conscious choice of lifestyle.

From a legal standpoint, the NBC notes that smoking is currently a legal choice that cannot be prohibited – except in the case of minors – consequently, this cannot lead to a reduction in the healthcare to which each person has a right. However, the harmful effects of smoking inflict extremely high human and economic costs on the entire community. This implicates a commitment of resources which could be used to meet other legitimate and pressing needs. Therefore, it is the NBC’s opinion that the community may rightly seek solutions that take into account the interests not only of smokers, but of all citizens.

The NBC considers ethically reprehensible that the government should profit from the sale of tobacco and - conversely – public engagement is necessary in the fight against tobacco use by involvement of civil society as a whole, with particular regard to doctors, pharmacists and health care workers in general. More specifically, States should invest in prevention by promoting accurate information on the hazards of tobacco consumption, aimed particularly at young people; limit the damage caused by its use through focused anti-smoking campaigns and increase the effectiveness of measures taken to protect against passive smoking; they should further better understanding of the less known aspects related to tobacco use, such as, the mechanisms of dependency; favour reconversion of this sector; prohibit all types of advertising of products and/or brands related to smoking. In addition, the NBC hopes that the same ethical rules will apply to research related to tobacco use as those that apply to biomedical research in general.

Lastly, the NBC emphasises the importance of overcoming addiction because dependency limits individual freedom and is the main obstacle in the fight against tobacco use.