Swiss lung specialists call for smoke-free premises to protect the general public from passive smoking

Picture taken from the BAG campaign www.rauchenschadet.ch

It is with great concern that the Swiss lung specialists note that many people in Switzerland continue to suffer from exposure to tobacco smoke and premature death[1] without ever having smoked themselves[2]. In Switzerland, one is more likely to die as a result of passive smoking than be the victim of a violent crime, and fewer people die from AIDS and illegal drugs than from passive smoking[3].

For many years, the tobacco industry has gone to great lengths to conceal this information, devising clever propaganda campaigns, concealing studies, and cheating in research[4]. For many years, the tobacco industry has made its influence felt in the catering trade, paid for campaigns and ensured that restaurants are not made smoke-free[5]. In all, the tobacco industry has effectively prevented the general public from being protected from the harmful effects of passive smoking.

It is time to protect the general public from passive smoking.

Swiss lung specialists recognise each adult individual's right to make their own decisions about their smoking habits. However, this goes only as far as the health of others is not jeopardised nor their freedom restricted. Smoke-free clean air is the normal state – not the other way around. The general public has a right to clean air. For this reason, all politicians in our country are called on to assume their responsibility and provide clear legal regulations concerning the absence of smoke in spaces accessible to the general public such as administrative buildings, teaching institutions, meeting places, theatres and concert halls, public transport, sports arenas and hospitals![6] This is about protecting the greatest good humans have – our health – by reducing the general public's exposure to passive smoking.

As entrepreneurs, restaurant proprietors also have a responsibility concerning the health of their patrons and employees alike. Basic hygiene is not at the discretion of the proprietor, but rather a requirement that must be met by all – be it a pub or a gourmet restaurant. For this reason, guidelines governing kitchen hygiene in all catering enterprises have been introduced: proprietors are not at will to decide whether or not they are going to apply them. Only the tobacco industry and some of their allies continue to expect the general public to tolerate being exposed to and being harmed by tobacco smoke in any place and at any time. Now is the time to establish clear guidelines for air hygiene in the catering trade as well: employees in restaurants and hotels have the same right to a smoke-free workplace as employees in other industries.[7]

Defining «smoke-free tables» will not solve the problem; tobacco smoke cannot be confined to a corner of the premises, and even the most efficient ventilation is no solution to this problem. There is a need for strictly separated rooms. Even simpler would be to insist that all restaurants be smoke-free. One option would be to offer a «smoking lounge» to patrons. Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Sweden, many states of the United States, Italy, and other countries protect their general public from the effects of passive smoking as they have successfully legislated that public buildings and restaurants must be smoke-free. This measure has not led to unemployment or empty restaurants as tirelessly claimed by the catering trade. Many Swiss restaurant owners are in support of a law to this effect – which makes it even more surprising that the Swiss catering trade association (GastroSuisse) continues to baulk at the notion. This contradicts the best interests of the general public – perhaps reflecting the long-standing financial contributions by the cigarette industry to GastroSuisse.

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Notes:

[1] Passive smoking leads to cardiovascular disease, respiratory difficulties such as asthma and chronic bronchitis as well as chronic headache and eye and nasal mucosa symptoms. Passive smoking can lead to the same types of cancer as in active smoking, including lung, laryngeal, oesophageal, and bladder cancer.

[2] Seventy-five percent of the general public do not smoke. Either they never smoked at all or have overcome their nicotine addiction.

[3] According to conservative estimates, one person dies every day from passive smoking in Switzerland i.e. as a result of exposure to other peoples' tobacco smoke. In 2002, the Swiss Federal Authority for Statistics reported 89 deaths related to violent crimes, 94 fatalities due to AIDS, and 167 victims of illegal drugs.

[4] In the 1980s, the tobacco industry performed literally hundreds of studies on passive smoking, but concealed their results (Lancet online 11 November 2004). For example Ragnar Rylander, a Professor of Medicine at the University of Geneva, played down or suppressed data on passive smoking for many years as commissioned by a tobacco company and covertly received large sums of money. This has been called «a breach of scientific integrity» by the University of Geneva (www.prevention.ch).

[5] The Swiss TV magazine, «Kassensturz», revealed on March 1 and 8, 2005, how the Swiss catering trade association (GastroSuisse) co-operates with the tobacco industry. GastroSuisse ran campaigns in its member enterprises that were paid for by the tobacco industry.

[6] Prof. Dr. med. Felix Gutzwiller, «National Counsellor» of Zurich, presented to parliament the initiative «For the protection of the general public and economy against passive smoking» in pursuit of this objective.

[7] Hotel & Gastro Union is the leading organisation in this industry representing some 18,200 workers in hotels and restaurants. In a survey amongst its members, 78.5% of the interviewed individuals supported a smoke-free catering trade (press release of 18 Jan. 2005).