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Western brands are popular among smokers in developing countries

The largest ever conference on the health effects of smoking has opened in Chicago with denunciations of the international tobacco industry.

One speaker said the harm caused by smoking was the biggest pandemic of preventable disease in history.

The organisers of the World Conference on Tobacco have warned that if current trends continue, 10 million people will die annually from tobacco-related illnesses by the year 2030.

Most of the deaths will be in developing countries, where healthcare systems are least able to cope.

The co-chairman of the week-long meeting in Chicago, Dr Thomas Houston, said the conference would study ways of curbing the world tobacco industry's production and promotion of its products.



More than 4,000 medical experts and public health officials from 120 countries are attending the Chicago gathering. The last world conference on tobacco was held in Beijing in 1997.

Tobacco facts

1.1bn people smoke - a third of world adult population

47% of men smoke

12% of women smoke

Tobacco causes about 10,000 deaths daily

Source: WHO

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The conference is sponsored by major US medical organisations, including the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Cancer Society. It comes amid a hardening of attitudes towards the big tobacco companies.

A delegate from the American Cancer Society said nearly all the current four million annual deaths from tobacco misuse would be preventable were it not for the "renegade and immoral industry which puts profit above human life".

Randolph Smoak of the AMA condemned the big international tobacco firms as "merchants of death".

'Secret campaign'

The World Health Organisation (WHO) last week accused the industry of having waged a secret campaign to undermine its international efforts to counter the dangers of smoking - an allegation denied by the industry.

"We need to give it the same kind of attention as we did with polio in the 1950s and 60s. Polio is a forgotten disease now," said Dr Houston of the AMA.

Experts say the tobacco industry has responded to legal setbacks in the West by stepping up its decades-old drive to market cigarettes around the world.

Public action against smoking has gone further in the United States than in any other country. US tobacco companies are currently fighting off an award of \$145bn to smokers in Florida damaged by their habit.

Dr Houston argues that smoking is "a chronic relapsing disease".



Russia has become a big market for western tobacco firms

"It's a physical dependency like cocaine - that can be treated."

Coordinated campaign

Public health experts are now seeking to coordinate the various strands of the anti-smoking campaign.

Advertising, taxes, grass-roots organisation, anti-smoking legislation and political will have to be part of a comprehensive offensive, according to Dr Houston.

Conference organisers say the

“ There are more smokers in China than people in the United States ”

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tobacco industry has been trying to deter developing countries from levying taxes on cigarettes or enacting western-style laws that bar smoking in public buildings.

Dr Thomas Houston

In China and many other developing countries smoking - particularly of western brands of cigarettes - has become a status symbol and there are few warnings about health hazards.

Conference sessions are scheduled to cover the scientific basis for nicotine addiction, the lessons learned from anti-smoking campaigns and analyses of tobacco industry tactics.

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