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What is the most effective way to prevent smoking in youth?

Young people in Germany between the ages of 12 and 17 smoke considerably less than in 2001: The rate of smokers among youth has dropped from 28 percent in 2001 to 12 percent in 2012. In a recent publication, the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) reports that the decline was the result of a number of legal measures that have had a substantial impact on tobacco use among young people.

“The considerable increases in the tax on tobacco between 2002 and 2005 in particular resulted in a significant decline in the percentage of smokers in this age group,” says Dr. Martina Pötschke-Langer, head of the Cancer Prevention Unit at the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ). She is editor of the most recent fact sheet “Tobacco prevention in Germany – what works?”. According to Pötschke-Langer, further declines followed the broad public debate on protection for non-smokers and the introduction of non-smoker protection legislation between 2007 and 2010. That period saw another significant drop in the percentage of smokers among youth: from 18 to 13 percent. Another effective measure was the change in youth protection laws, which initially raised the legal age for purchasing cigarettes to 16 years (2003) and finally to 18 (2007). The government’s concern about protecting youth from the dangers of smoking was further supported by larger warning labels on cigarette packages (*since 2002) and the tobacco advertising ban in print media and the Internet, enforced in 2007. In the most recent publication, a team of scientists led by Pötschke-Langer from DKFZ also studied the effect of prevention programs in schools. The latest evaluations revealed that school prevention programs in Germany reach only nine to 15 percent of students in the respective age groups and on the average only prevents or delays smoking initiation in one student per class. The scientists conclude that the small reach and low effectiveness of these programs have little impact on the smoking behavior of youth.

The tobacco industry in Ireland and the United Kingdom asserts that health education in Germany has been particularly successful and recommends that their governments should imitate this “German model.” However, the true aim of this “recommendation” is to counteract current plans for further regulation of the tobacco market, such as introducing standardized packaging. “The results of our study confirm the broad international scientific consensus about the effectiveness of considerable tobacco tax increases in changing the smoking behavior of youth,” says Martina Pötschke-Langer. “We emphatically reject the assertions made by the tobacco lobby that Germany’s successes are due to education programs. We hope that this publication will encourage governments to take further legal and regulatory measures that have an impact on the smoking behavior not only among youth but also in the population at large.”

The publication can be obtained from the Division of Cancer Prevention (who-cc@dkfz.de) and is available for download at:

www.dkfz.de/de/tabakkontrolle/download/Publikationen/AdWfP/AdWfP_Tobacco_prevention_in_Germany_what_works.pdf

The German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) with its more than 2,500 employees is the largest biomedical research institute in Germany. At DKFZ, more than 1,000 scientists investigate how cancer develops, identify cancer risk factors and endeavor to find new strategies to prevent people from getting cancer. They develop novel approaches to make tumor diagnosis more precise and treatment of cancer patients more successful. The staff of the Cancer Information Service (KID) offers information about the widespread disease of cancer for patients, their families, and the general public. Jointly with Heidelberg University Hospital, DKFZ has established the National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT) Heidelberg, where promising approaches from cancer

research are translated into the clinic. In the German Consortium for Translational Cancer Research (DKTK), one of six German Centers for Health Research, DKFZ maintains translational centers at seven university partnering sites. Combining excellent university hospitals with high-profile research at a Helmholtz Center is an important contribution to improving the chances of cancer patients. DKFZ is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers, with ninety percent of its funding coming from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the remaining ten percent from the State of Baden-Württemberg.

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