

*In brief*

**Germany introduces generic substitution by chemists:** The German parliament has decided that chemists in Germany should normally dispense the generic version of drugs when patients present their prescriptions, unless a doctor specifically forbids it. The aim is to prevent a further rise in the health budget. Doctors can also prevent substitution by prescribing a drug within the lower third of the price range for that type of drug.

**Argentina reduces drug prices because of devaluation crisis:** Argentina's government said it would produce affordable generic versions of around 20 key drugs for distribution to the country's health centres after some international pharmaceutical firms began raising prices in response to the devaluation of the peso.

**NHS Confederation appoints new chief executive:** Dr Gillian Morgan, chief executive of North and East Devon Health Authority, has been appointed chief executive of the NHS Confederation. Dr Morgan qualified in medicine in 1976.

**Abstinence makes the heart grow stronger:** In patients with heart disease as a result of chronic alcohol consumption, abstinence and controlled drinking can lead to improvement in left ventricular function, Spanish researchers report in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2002;136:192-200). In a study of 55 men with previous alcoholic cardiomyopathy, patients who stopped drinking alcohol and those who reduced their consumption (to 20-60 g ethanol a day) were found to have a significant increase in left ventricular ejection fraction.

**FDA bans blood donations from transplant recipients:** The US Food and Drug Administration is recommending that US blood banks refuse blood donations from individuals who have received transplants of human and animal products. The guidance is designed to reduce the introduction of transmissible zoonotic and human infections into the nation's blood supply.

## Campaigners fear that Russia's new tobacco law won't work

Kirill Danishevski *Moscow* and Martin McKee *London*

Russia has introduced its first law in more than 20 years that limits the use of tobacco. The law, signed by President Putin last July, came into force last month.

It is the first to be enacted since the 1970s, when smoking in trains and by doctors when working with patients was banned.

The new law prohibits almost all forms of tobacco advertising, including on television, radio, and billboards, and outlaws smoking at places of work and in health, cultural, governmental, and educational facilities, except in designated smoking areas. All flights lasting under three hours are to be non-smoking.

Maximum tar and nicotine levels for cigarettes are also laid down for the first time. The maximum tar level in filter cigarettes has been set at 14 mg per cigarette, while the maximum level of nicotine has been set at 1.2 mg.



When will the billboards go?

The corresponding limits for non-filter cigarettes are 16 mg of tar and 1.3 mg of nicotine. These are higher than the limit in the

European Union, where the level is currently less than 12 mg tar per cigarette and is soon to be reduced to 10 mg.

Action to reduce smoking among children includes making illegal the sale of cigarettes in packs of less than 20, the sale to anyone under 18 years of age, and vending from machines. In recognition of the tobacco industry's policy of placing products in films, the law bans the depiction of smoking on television and in theatres and cinemas, unless the smoking is an essential part of the plot.

Representatives of the tobacco industry in Russia have not yet protested much about the restrictions, making some doctors wonder whether the law is going to be effective. There is considerable scope in the law to designate many public areas as smoking areas, which could reduce its effect, and the authorities do not seem in a hurry to enforce some of the law's other provisions. Although the law has been in force for several weeks, about 20% of advertisements on the streets of Moscow continue to promote cigarettes. □

## Europe moving at the speed of its slowest member in controlling tobacco

Phyllida Brown *Exeter*

Girls in Europe are now more likely to smoke than their mothers, and teenage smoking is on a "slight upward trend" across the continent, the World Health Organization has said. Yet some countries—mainly in the West—have succeeded in cutting tobacco use with measures such as advertising curbs and price rises.

The findings are part of a wide ranging report by the WHO's European regional headquarters on the efforts of its 51 member states to control tobacco since 1997. The report, which finds a "complex and contrasted picture of achievements and failures," has been released this week ahead of a tobacco summit for European health ministers in Warsaw, Poland, on 18 February.

The Warsaw summit's aim is to agree a European action plan up to 2007 and to set out the region's position in support of the global Framework Conven-

tion on Tobacco Control. This international "health treaty," the first of its kind, enters its fourth round of negotiations in March and is due to come into effect by May 2003. If successful, the treaty could regulate international advertising, enforce pack warnings across countries, and strengthen controls on tobacco smuggling.

But critics say that the European region's position is being watered down by its richest and most powerful bloc—the European Union. Because the union makes policy by consensus, its more progressive members are held back by the least progressive, while nations waiting to join the European Union will always take the party line.

"Europe is moving at the speed of its slowest ship, Germany, and that ship has got the tobacco industry on the bridge," said Clive Bates, director of

Action on Smoking and Health. Meanwhile Britain, which has been markedly progressive on some tobacco control issues, is weak on reducing passive smoking, said Mr Bates.

Nevertheless, Dr Marc Danzon, the WHO's European regional director, said that he was "hopeful" that real progress will be achieved next week. The WHO report said that tobacco consumption was down in countries that had implemented comprehensive and sustained policies, such as setting cigarette taxes above inflation and imposing tough curbs on advertising and promotion. Finland, France, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom have had some success, Dr Danzon said. However, no country has met all the targets set for the region.

The tobacco industry has also adopted new tactics to push its products, said the WHO. It has recently tried, for example, to take over educational "anti-smoking" programmes in schools in cash-strapped eastern European states. □

*The European Report on Tobacco Control Policy* is available at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)