

**David BYRNE**

European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection

## **The Warsaw Declaration - Turning the tide on the tobacco epidemic**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

WHO European Ministerial Conference for a Tobacco-free Europe

**Warsaw, 19 February 2002**

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address the Ministerial Conference for a tobacco-free Europe, and to present the preparations which the European Commission is making for the next round of negotiations for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. These negotiations play a key role in the evolution of a comprehensive European tobacco control strategy. And of course, they have important implications for our future Member States.

There should be no doubt that the European Community is now firmly establishing itself as a major player in tobacco control at a global level. In addressing this global epidemic, we need to build global strategies. And a larger future Community, will have to take a greater share of the responsibility for making a difference worldwide.

When faced with obstacles in this area, we sometimes hear the pessimists talk about the “unfavorable climate” for tobacco control. Well I am not in this camp. I believe that when it comes to life and death issues for our citizens – we need to make the political weather. We need to take our political courage and be bold.

And I believe that the Framework Convention process gives us a unique opportunity to “make the political weather” for the global climate of tobacco control policy. It is a once-in-a-generation chance to change the context on this killer scourge. Of course for the World Health Organisation which is an inspirational driving force behind the project, this is both a challenge and an opportunity.

But that is why I, for one, am here today. Just to let you know that in the work ahead, we will stand shoulder to shoulder. And despite the inevitable resistance of vested interests, let me confirm for you today, that as Europe’s first designated health Commissioner, tobacco control remains both a personal and a political priority.

And as I have told both Dr. Brundtland and Dr. Danzon, we will do everything possible from our side to mobilise a global consensus on tobacco control. Because it’s high time we put an end to this needless waste that claims the lives of eight people every minute around the world.

I know that a significant impetus from the Community as a whole, is vital for a successful outcome. It is a priority for my services. And I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the work which they are doing under difficult resource constraints to deliver. Together with the Council, my services are preparing the Community position for the next round.

But building a wider consensus is essential to making progress. And that is why our recent meetings with key stakeholders namely the candidate countries and the NGO community are vital. As observers, the NGOs play a very important role in raising awareness. At national level they are keeping up the political pressure for legislative change. And of course they keep us all on our toes! But I believe that as the talks progress there will be less and less daylight between our position and the wishes of our stakeholders.

Of course here in Poland it would be inappropriate, to say the least, to start lecturing on the meaning of the word “solidarity”! But solidarity and consensus with our future Member States is playing a crucial role in taking a progressive line in the Convention. And here in Warsaw on the banks of the Vistula, in the heart of Europe, you can see just how important the weight of an enlarged E.U. will be in the international health arena. And I look forward to deepening our relations on key health issues in the pre-accession period ahead!

I am pleased to note that so much progress has already been made with our Member States. But despite this progress, both our future Member States and NGOs have voiced some concerns on areas where they think the Community position is not strong enough. I have to say that the Commission shares some of these concerns.

But as you know, in the Geneva negotiations, the Commission never speaks on its own behalf, but only on behalf of the European Community and its Member States. And it takes the floor only on issues under Community competence. Those under Member States' competence are dealt with by the Presidency.

However in our in-house discussions with the Member States – the Commission has recently underlined that a more flexible and a more ambitious attitude is needed in the Community position on a number of points. And whilst there has been significant progress thanks to the joint efforts with the majority of our Member States – there are still a few issues. And here let me be very frank.

For years we have been hearing from some Member States that tobacco control legislation is a not primarily for the EU, but for national competence. It is - they say - an issue for the theology of subsidiarity. They are not – you understand - against tobacco control legislation as such – they are against it happening at European level.

But here in this international negotiation that goes beyond Community competence, they finally have the opportunity to practice what they preach. And how do they react? Well surprisingly they continue to block proposals on issues such as a complete ban on advertising.

And whilst we won't hear much about it in the press, frankly I find it impossible to understand how some Member States continue to block solutions to this deadly problem.

How is it possible that Governments whose first duty is the protection of their citizens well-being, will block and obstruct and even litigate, rather than put their citizens health first?

Because for our citizens, renewing the politics of health, is about restoring the health of our politics. And for me, where you stand on tobacco control is the bottomline.

Alongside the advertising issue there is foot-dragging on other issues which frankly beggar belief.

Take passive smoking. Now some people think that passive smoking is a bit of an overreaction. Or some even view it as something of a joke! As in the case of an article written recently in my own country by a once-liberal journalist, who attacked the health minister for daring to suggest even looking at the issue to protect the health of his citizens.

But our medical faculties are piled high with studies estimating that passive smoking accounts for between 30 and 50 thousand deaths every year in the European Union. And this is without even mentioning the contribution of passive smoking to cot deaths which is regularly underlined in emerging studies.

I am sure you would agree that if these numbers were caused by any other epidemic, we would be sending in the rapid reaction force or banning the culprit products!

So for those who are wavering on these issues let us work together to take a more ambitious, a more productive stand. Let us work towards a total ban on tobacco advertising in the Convention. Let us make a start on passive smoking. Let us stiffen our resolve on sales promotion and product standards. And let us move forward where the path ahead is beginning to become clear, from phasing out tobacco subsidies to banning duty free sales.

So have no doubt about my commitment to making the Convention a turning point in the battle for the health of our citizens. Let me again state that this Commission will continue to press for a strong and effective Framework Convention for Tobacco Control, as the Warsaw Declaration urges it to.

Because this is one Warsaw pact which I hope will deliver the goods!

I do not have the time today to go in detail into the significant legislative progress which the European Union is making in on tobacco control, despite the best efforts of the industry. But let me just give you a thumbnail sketch of our legislative campaign.

First there is our Comprehensive Product legislation which brings tighter tar content and labelling under one roof. It covers exports, increases health warnings in size and nature.

Most significantly, importers and manufacturers of tobacco products will now have to provide regular information on non-tobacco ingredients such as, the additives in their products. They will also have to submit toxicological data on these ingredients. Quite a shopping list of deliverables as you can see. But that is just the beginning.

In fact, before 2005, that is before the expiry of my term of office, the Commission will propose a new Directive concerning a common list of ingredients authorised for tobacco products. This will enable scientific advice to be made available on what is in a cigarette and why such additives are present.

I will be seeking advice, for instance, on whether these additives make the taste of tobacco more palatable to the young first-time smoker. This is important because 80 % of those who smoke start before they are 18 years of age.

Of course big tobacco industry knows this too. And as the first legal industry to generate “disposable consumers”, it obviously needs to find replacements. They also know that tobacco consumption by the young cannot be justified on the basis of consumer choice. However, they do justify adult consumption on this basis. We all know how real consumer choice is for the addict. None moreso than the addiction industry.

I guess I am unlikely to win any popularity awards from the tobacco industry. Especially when we look at our provisions on descriptors, such as “light” and which may mislead the consumer on the health effects of a tobacco product, will be prohibited.

Of course, certain tobacco firms, particularly contest this latter provision claiming that their intellectual property rights are being violated. Indeed, Japan Tobacco International has recently taken the Commission to the European Court of Justice on this provision. I am confident that we can defend our case. But again isn't it ironic - to see an industry citing “freedom of speech” -when its own products rot the tongues and mouths of its consumers to a stony premature silence.

In our candidate countries I know that this legislation will pose a challenge. But we must work together to deliver this change. There is unlikely to be flexibility on these issues in accession negotiations. And with all the current debate underway, let us not add an unnecessary health burden to the cost of accession, for candidates and citizens alike.

If I had more time, I would explain how progress on adopting a new legally watertight tobacco advertising directive is before the Parliament. I have every confidence that the European Parliament which is committed to connecting with citizens, will soon provide its much awaited report.

Additionally, I have asked my services to prepare a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the reduction of smoking and on initiatives to improve tobacco control. This non-binding initiative should be ready by the summer. It will cover some issues - like certain forms of indirect advertising - which are not addressed in our new Advertising Directive.

The Recommendation will also pick up on other key issues such as limiting the access of young people to tobacco products. Finally, the proposal will also cover certain issues arising from the WHO Framework Convention negotiations, but which Community Directives cannot cover.

Whilst we are turning the tide on the legislative front, we need to open new fronts in the battle for the hearts and minds of the public. And I am currently looking at how new trends in public attitudes can be applied to address the vector of infection - namely the industry itself.

I will continue to look to all of you for advice on how we can open the eyes of a new generation of mainly young and female victims, who are seen by big tobacco as expendable profit-fodder. Just so many lives to go up in smoke.

I would like to take this opportunity of our meeting here in Warsaw, to announce that the Commission will start a major communication campaign later this year with the specific objective of curbing smoking prevalence among children and adolescents.

The need for such action is confirmed by the findings of the WHO's new European Report on Tobacco Control, which states that no country in the European Region has shown a significant decrease in smoking by young people since 1997. As a matter of the highest priority, we need to change the image of smoking among young people as "cool".

I have spoken at the outset about the key role played by our civic society partners. So for this campaign, strong partnerships will be built with the relevant stakeholders, such as the competent authorities in the Member States, and with the NGOs who are active in this field. We want to give this campaign very high visibility both at European and at national level, and we very much hope for your support in order to achieve the highest possible impact. I hope that I can count on you for support in widening the impact of this campaign.

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, in the battle to come we will need to generate a global climate of resistance, capable of dealing with the insidious menace posed by the tobacco epidemic.

A menace which is deliberate, calculating and deeply cynical about the value of human life. A menace which, as we have seen in last year's expo tobacco" activities, even dares to advise governments to discount human suffering against the long term budgetary benefits of premature death.

But, as this conference - and the Warsaw Declaration which it proposes to adopt - confirms: the tide is turning. In the accession countries, in the European Union, and globally. The entire Framework Convention process – and our determination to see it through – is further solid evidence for this. And when ultimately the smoke has cleared, we can be proud of the contribution we have made to living in a healthier world.