

Tobacco smuggling is killing more people than illegal drugs

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Tobacco smuggling causes around 4,000 premature deaths a year—four times the number of deaths caused by the use of all smuggled illegal drugs put together—but the UK government is not doing enough to tackle the problem, claim experts on bmj.com today.

Professor Robert West from the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre and colleagues argue that more smokers would quit if cigarettes cost more, but at around half the price, smuggled tobacco is keeping the prices down.

Around 21% of all tobacco smoked in the UK is smuggled into the country. If there were no smuggling, the price of legal tobacco would increase by around 12%. According to the authors, this would lead to 5-8% of smokers kicking the habit — saving at least 4000 lives a year.

A reduction in tobacco smuggling would also help reduce health inequalities because low income smokers are more likely to use smuggled tobacco and they are also more likely to quit because of price increases.

While the authors acknowledge that tobacco smuggling has reduced considerably since the government 'Tackling Tobacco Smuggling' strategy was announced in 2000, they argue that more needs to be done and call for more action and resources to tackle the problem.

For example, the UK government has not followed the lead of all the

other European Union countries and has failed to sign up to legally enforceable agreements with the two tobacco companies, Philip Morris International and Japan Tobacco International, to ensure that they tightly control and regulate distribution and stop supplying contractors involved in smuggling.

The authors point out that because public targets for reducing smuggling into the UK were dropped in March this year, the HM Revenue and Customs can no longer be held publicly accountable for performance in this area. They believe that when the new UK Border Agency take over responsibility for cross-border control later this year, there will be a risk that tobacco smuggling will be sidelined by the main focus of immigration.

They conclude by urging the UK Government to set out comprehensive measures and clear targets for the UK Border Agency to control the illegal tobacco, and for the government to support negotiations, currently underway, for a strong international treaty to tackle smuggling.

Source: British Medical Journal

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