

WHO awards China official for battling smoking

July 17 2012, by GILLIAN WONG



A Chinese man smokes in a outdoor area designated for smoking in Beijing Tuesday, July 17, 2012. The World Health Organization is giving China's health minister an award for battling smoking in the country whose people and government remain prodigiously addicted to tobacco. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) — The World Health Organization is giving China's health minister an award for battling smoking in a country whose people and government remain prodigiously addicted to tobacco.

China has stepped up efforts to curb tobacco use in recent years. The Health Ministry released the country's first official report on the harms of smoking in May, banned smoking in its office building and hospitals, and is lobbying for airports and other indoor public facilities to do the same.

WHO said [Health Minister](#) Chen Zhu will be presented a certificate of recognition at a ceremony on Wednesday attended by WHO chief Margaret Chan.

Tobacco control is a difficult task in a nation where huge revenues from the state-owned tobacco monopoly hinder anti-smoking measures. Nearly 30 percent of adults in China smoke — about 300 million people, roughly equal to the entire U.S. population — a percentage that has not changed significantly.

The tobacco monopoly's influence is pervasive, with cigarette companies sponsoring schools, sports events and fostering close ties with the academic community.

In December, a tobacco scientist who specializes in adding traditional Chinese herbs to cigarettes in an attempt to reduce their harmful effects was appointed to the prestigious Chinese Academy of Engineering in a move that was criticized by other academics, several of whom sent letters to the academy in protest.

Despite the many challenges that remain in stamping out tobacco use, anti-smoking activists welcomed the WHO award.

"Among the government departments, the Health Ministry is the one that has made the biggest efforts in promoting tobacco control," said Xu Guihua, vice president of the government-affiliated Chinese Association on Tobacco Control. "On many occasions, Minister Chen Zhu has told the public that tobacco is harmful and asked people to give up smoking. He also called on the government to step up tobacco control legislation."

Xu said China still needs to issue a national [tobacco control](#) plan, raise prices of cigarettes and better educate the public on the health risks of smoking.

She criticized the apparent conflict of interest in the dual role that China's State Tobacco Monopoly Administration plays as both tobacco policymaker and overseer of the China National [Tobacco](#) Corp. — the world's largest cigarette maker.

Health officials have warned that smoking-related deaths could hit 3 million per year by 2030 without greater efforts.

Last year's certificate for anti-smoking efforts was awarded to Australian Attorney General Nicola Roxon, who as health minister led a campaign to make Australia the first country in the world to require cigarettes to be sold in plain packages with large, graphic warnings.

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