



Science Reporter

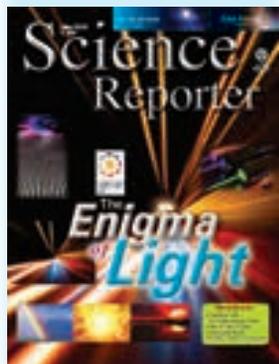
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FOR A TOBACCO-FREE REGIME

Baseball in America, often described as the nation's religion, is today struggling to find its feet against a dangerous competitor: chewing tobacco. Starting off with the need to keep their mouths moist during long games in dry and dusty conditions, chewing tobacco has slowly become a tradition with baseball players. But, true to the oft-repeated slogan "Tobacco Kills", chewing tobacco has claimed the lives of some of its most celebrated players like Babe Ruth and Bill Tuttle. More recently, Tony Gwynn, who developed salivary gland cancer, died in 2014 after several years of treatment.

In India, the scenario is scarier. According to a report by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, India has the highest prevalence of oral cancer globally, with 75,000 to 80,000 new cases of oral cancers being reported every year. There is little doubt that chewing tobacco kills. Some consider it more harmful than smoking.

According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (Smokeless Tobacco and Some Tobacco-Specific N-Nitrosamines, 2007), chewing tobacco contains 28 cancer-causing agents, the most harmful being nitrosamines formed during the growing, curing, fermenting, and aging of tobacco. The level of nitrosamine in the tobacco determines the risk of cancer.

Then there are polonium-210 (a radioactive element found in tobacco fertilizer), polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, apart from the highly addictive nicotine, which is present more in quantity than in cigarettes. Keeping tobacco in the mouth for 30 minutes is said to release as much nicotine as smoking three cigarettes.

According to a monograph brought out by the National Cancer Institute of USA, nicotine in the tobacco is absorbed through the lining of the mouth tissues directly into the blood, from where it goes to the brain. Even after the tobacco is removed from the mouth, nicotine continues to be absorbed into the bloodstream. Also, the nicotine stays in the blood longer for users of smokeless tobacco than for smokers.

Smokeless tobacco is documented to cause oral cancer, esophageal cancer, and pancreatic cancer. It could also cause heart disease, gum disease, and oral lesions such as leukoplakia, precancerous white patches in the mouth.

Therefore, in a most welcome move recently the Delhi government banned the sale, purchase, storage and manufacturing of all forms of chewable tobacco including gutkha and pan masala containing tobacco. The Delhi government notification is in pursuance of a series of Supreme Court directions to ban gutka in the city.

Perhaps, this could be the starting point for a tobacco-free regime throughout the country.



Hasan Jawaid Khan

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