

Smoking banned in hotel for delegates

The ashtrays and matches in the guest rooms at Jingxi Hotel, one of the designated hotels for deputies to the National People's Congress, have been removed this year.

The small move, for Shen Jinjin, an NPC deputy and a longtime anti-tobacco campaigner, is a big step forward in tobacco control.

As an NPC deputy for the past decade, he brought forward various suggestions to combat smoking, some of which have been accepted, such as the 100 percent smoking ban in public places introduced by Beijing, Shenzhen and Shanghai.

"We've seen strong restrictive measures over tobacco advertising in the new Advertising Law," added Shen, head of the Disease Control and Prevention Center in Yancheng, Jiangsu province.

"At the two sessions over the years, positive changes can be seen," he said.

Previously, participants in the two sessions even smoked during group discussions in the meeting rooms, and ashtrays and matches were widely placed.

In that scenario, "I would stop people politely and deliver anti-smoking messages, particularly the proven health-related hazards," he said. "NPC deputies are usually influential and I don't want to miss the opportunity to spread the message of tobacco control."

As a veteran public health worker, Shen knows well the negative health impacts from smoking and the huge medical bills from treating smoking-related diseases.

The National Health and Family Planning Commission estimates that more than 1 million Chinese die from smoking-related diseases each year.

With more information becoming available to the public, a consensus about smoking control has been gradually reached in China, the world's largest cigarette producer and consumer.

In 2015, Beijing passed the country's strongest anti-smoking law, and delegates to the two sessions thereafter became able to enjoy a truly smoke-free environment in the city.

"Now they can only smoke outside the hotel, despite the chilly and windy weather here in early March," he said.

Also, they began to accept a controlled way of smoking and "some smoking deputies even co-signed my motion urging the country to pass a State-level anti-smoking law," he noted.

Beijing pioneered the introduction of strong smoking bans in public places,

which should be expanded nationwide, he urged.

“We have the knowledge that smoking harms health and we have wide support from the public for smoking controls. Why is it so difficult to make a national law?” he said.

In November, Mao Qun’an, spokesman for the National Health and Family Planning Commission, the nation’s top health authority, said a national law would be enacted in 2016—and though the commission was charged to draft such a law, it didn’t.

Shen blamed that on interference from the tobacco industry, a major source of tax revenue for the government. “The fight is not over, and I will keep up the effort,” he said.