

Speech by Secretary for Health at closing ceremony of Annual Training Programme on Tobacco Control 2023 (English only) (with photos)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, at the closing ceremony of the Annual Training Programme on Tobacco Control 2023 today (December 7):

Vice-minister Yu Xuejun (Vice-minister of the National Health Commission (NHC)), Professor Judith Mackay (Special Advisor of the Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control, Director of the Asian Consultancy on Tobacco Control and Senior Policy Advisor of the World Health Organization (WHO)), ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to speak to you today at the closing ceremony of the Annual Training Programme on Tobacco Control organised by the Department of Health of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. May I first extend a warm greeting to all of you, especially experts and friends coming from the Mainland and overseas. We are most honoured to have Vice-minister Yu and his colleagues from the NHC joining us today.

Tobacco consumption constitutes the single most important preventable risk factor for death and chronic diseases including cancers and cardiovascular diseases. Hong Kong, like many advanced economies, has a healthcare system that is facing an enormous challenge associated with an ageing population and increasing prevalence of chronic disease. Second-hand smoke generated by smoking is equally harmful in leading to various chronic diseases, and has serious negative impacts on the public and society. Tobacco consumption is estimated to be responsible for about 7 000 deaths in Hong Kong and over 8 million deaths worldwide each year.

The HKSAR Government seeks to safeguard public health with tobacco control policy that discourages smoking and minimises the impact of passive smoking on the public. We adopt a multipronged approach, comprising legislation, taxation, designation of non-smoking areas, enforcement, publicity, education, and smoking cessation. Hong Kong has been a champion for tobacco control and spared no effort in continuously enhancing our regulatory regime. Over the last 40 years or so, our smoking prevalence rate has decreased from over 20 per cent in the early 1980s down to 9.5 per cent in 2021, making Hong Kong one of the economies with the lowest smoking prevalence rate globally.

That said, there is no room for complacency when it comes to tobacco control. We have to stay vigilant on new developments. In recent years, the

emergence of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and other new smoking products such as heat-not-burn has posed new health risks and challenges. These products are often packaged as less harmful substitutes with promotion tactics targeted at youngsters and non-smokers, and will ultimately open a gateway to the eventual consumption of conventional cigarettes. Despite the sugar coating, all these new smoking products are equally harmful to health and produce second-hand smoke.

As such, we enacted legislation to prohibit any person from importing, promoting, manufacturing, selling or possessing for commercial purposes alternative smoking products, including all electronic smoking products, heated tobacco products and herbal cigarettes since April last year. It is a milestone for Hong Kong's mission in tobacco control.

In addition, we raised our tobacco duty earlier this year by over 30 per cent, making the increased tobacco duty about 64 per cent of the retail price of cigarettes. Taking the tobacco duty proportion of 75 per cent as recommended by the WHO as target, we will continue to review the overall effectiveness of tobacco control measures and the pace of future duty level adjustments.

With our target set on further lowering our smoking prevalence rate to 7.8 per cent by 2025, the HKSAR Government launched a public consultation on the tobacco control strategies earlier this year for collecting the public's views on the next phase of tobacco control. In the consultation document, we set out four main strategies for underpinning the next phase of tobacco control, viz, (1) to regulate supply, suppress demand; (2) to ban promotion and reduce attractiveness; (3) to expand non-smoking areas to mitigate harm; and (4) to enhance education and support smoking cessation. We are in the process of analysing the consultation outcome and will map out the way forward very soon.

Tobacco control is a longstanding battle all around the world. It is important that different countries and regions join hands together to contain the proliferation of tobacco use and create a tobacco-free society for our next generation. The HKSAR has been designated by the World Health Organization as the Collaborating Centre for Smoking Cessation and Treatment of Tobacco Dependence since April 2012. We serve as a regional hub to support smoking cessation trainings and programme evaluation, in particular in the Western Pacific Region.

I am delighted to see that over the years, the Annual Training Programme on Tobacco Control has trained more than 100 healthcare personnel from Hong Kong, Macao, Mainland China, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. This year, participants from six countries/areas attend physically in Hong Kong. I trust the experiences shared over the past few days will be of great value to our policymakers and enforcement agencies.

Last but not least, I hope our guests have the time to enjoy the vibrancy and dynamics of our city Hong Kong and I look forward to welcoming you all again. Thank you.

