



Inauguration of the SCTS

The Syrian Center for Tobacco Studies (SCTS) is a project funded by a five- year grant program from the Fogarty international Center (FIC) of NIH. The main collaborating scientists are: Drs. Kenneth Ward, Thomas Eissenberg, and Wasim Maziak. SCTS was inaugurated formally on 31/05/2003 in Aleppo, Syria. In his speech, Dr. Haitham al Kamal, Chairman of the Board of the Syrian Society Against Cancer (SSAC), under whose auspices the SCTS was founded, stressed the importance of the partnership agreement that led to the foundation of SCTS and emphasized its role in promoting public health in Syria. In addition to SSAC, the partners involved in SCTS are: University of Memphis (Dr.Ward), Virginia Commonwealth University

(Dr.Eissenberg), and the University of Muenster, Muenster (Dr.Maziak), Aleppo School of Medicine, and Aleppo Department of Health. Dr. Wasim Maziak, director of SCTS, highlighted the importance of establishing a center of excellence in research in the Arab region, stressing the need to focus on smoking as one of the major public health problems facing development in the region. Studies are urgently needed, Dr. Maziak added, to explore different aspects of the smoking epidemic in order to design proper interventions. The inaugural session was followed by a field visit during which visitors were introduced to the activities and projects of the SCTS.

Objectives of SCTS

First: Optimize methods for studying tobacco use and local smoking practices using key informant interview and focus groups to guide the development of epidemiological, clinical laboratory, and treatment strategies.

Second: Describe, in a clinical laboratory, the subjective, psychological, and behavioral effects of smoking systems that are popular in the Eastern Mediterranean (EM) region, such as narghile. This laboratory will be established in Aleppo and will be modeled after the laboratory lead by Thomas Eissenberg at VCU.

Third: Test a primary care smoking cessation intervention tailored to the Syrian environment based on data from epidemiological and clinical laboratory research.

Fourth: Train Syrian tobacco researchers so that the expertise and resources necessary for sustaining and expanding SCTS will be in place locally at the project's end. In addition, provide support to other researchers in the EM by disseminating and giving consultation about the research instruments and methods.

The year in brief

Laboratory training session:

Dr. Samer Rastam, laboratory manager at the SCTS, attended a 2-week hands-on training course at Virginia Commonwealth University, during which he learned different aspects of running and maintaining a smoking laboratory, which will be established at the SCTS to study the clinical aspects of tobacco use methods common in Syria and the region (e.g. cigarette, water-pipe).

Website:

For more information about the center's activities and research, see our website at: www.scts-sy.org
The website provides a complete idea about the center work, objectives, staff, and the international partnership involved in the project.

On the website are the latest scientific research and the newsletter.

| Contents | page |
|--|------|
| - Laboratory training session | 1 |
| - Regional cooperation | 2 |
| - Institution Review Board | 2 |
| - SRNT conference | 2 |
| - SCTS Workshop in Helsinki | 2 |
| - Free smoking cessation clinic | 3 |
| -Prevalence and characteristic of narghile smoking among students in Aleppo, Syria | 3 |

Regional cooperation:

On an invitation by Drs. Rima Afifi and Samer Jabbour of the Tobacco Prevention and Control Research Group at the American University of Beirut (AUB), a team from SCTS visited AUB in April, 2003 and again in May, to explore areas of collaboration. During these visits, members of SCTS and AUB discussed common

interests in tobacco control research and agreed on the need for coordination and collaboration. The two groups will be meeting regularly to follow-up on specific projects and to promote a regional agenda for tobacco control.

Institutional Review Board

As a reflection of its commitment to international standards in research, including ethical principles of protection of human subjects, SCTS has set up an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB), the first of its kind in Syria. This board will be responsible for reviewing and approving research projects to ensure their

adherence to international standards and scientific and ethical guidelines in research design and conduct. The board consists of five members: Dr. Mahmoud Nasser, Dr. George Saade, and Dr. Sarab Agha, Author Nihad Sirees and Mrs. Hanifa Jabri.

Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco conference

In February 2003, a team from SCTS attended the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) ninth annual conference at New Orleans.

After the conference SCTS team attended a training course on interviewing techniques at the University of

Memphis including specialized training on data collection and analysis. Also they followed several courses on grant management and analytical methods.

Future activities

SCTS workshop in Helsinki

SCTS organizes its first workshop, entitled **“Building a Model Tobacco Control Research & Partnership Program in the Eastern Mediterranean Region”**, during the 12th world conference on Tobacco or Health, 3-8 August 2003 in Helsinki.

The objectives of this workshop, which is designated to meet the needs of researchers and institutions involved in tobacco control in the EM region, are to:

- a) Present an agenda for tobacco control research in the EM region.
- b) Develop regional cooperation in tobacco control research.
- c) Foster networking and collaboration between different institutions and individuals involved in tobacco control in the EM region in order to benefit

from the diverse resources available in the region and strengthen the scientific basis of tobacco control research.

Workshop program:

Four presentations (10 min. each):

- Creating local capacity in tobacco control research in the EM region (Wasim Maziak)
- The Syrian Center for Tobacco Studies: role of the clinical laboratory (Thomas Eissenberg).
- Developing smoking cessation interventions for the EM (Kenneth Ward).
- Experience of Tobacco Research Group at American University of Beirut (Samer Jabbour).

SCTS Ancillary Meeting in Helsinki

Also SCTS organizes an ancillary meeting, entitled “**Future of tobacco control network in the Eastern Mediterranean Region**”, during the 12th world conference on Tobacco or Health, in Helsinki. The objective of this meeting, is discussing the best ways to utilize the limited available resources in the region in a more rational and complimentary way, take the current

cooperation to the next level where mutual and multi-center project can be initiated in the region, and finally coordinating fund raising efforts and training opportunities in various tobacco control disciplines in order to enhance human and technical resources in this region.

Free smoking cessation clinic:

SCTS will launch soon a cessation clinic that will provide smoking cessation programs, and provide a suitable

medium to test different Smoking cessation methods in order to develop culturally sensitive cessation program.

Scientific studies:

Prevalence and characteristic of narghile smoking among University students in Syria

Narghile smoking is increasing alarmingly among all Arab societies, still little is known about its spread and pattern use. For this purpose, SCTS has conducted a cross sectional survey among students at Aleppo University, using an interviewer-administered questionnaire. This study showed that ever narghile smoking was seen among 62.6% of men and 29.8% of women, while current smoking was seen among 25.5% of men and 4.9% of women. Only 7.0% of men who smoked narghile were daily users, with no daily users among women students. Age of initiation of narghile was 19.2 for men and 21.7 for women. The salient feature of narghile smoking was its social pattern, where most users initiated and currently smoke narghile with friends. Narghile and cigarette smoking were closely related in this population, with narghile smoking most prevalent among daily cigarette smokers. Multivariate correlates of narghile smoking among students were being older, male, originating from a city residence,

Smoking cigarettes, having friends who smoke narghile, and coming from a household where a greater number of narghiles are smoked daily. This survey was used also to assess beliefs and attitudes related to narghile and contributing to its increased popularity among young people in Syria. The study showed that students seem to be attracted by the smell and taste of narghile smoke and distracted by the smoke and pollution it produces as well as its negative health effects. They associate the increase in this smoking habit with a trendy habit and an appealing way of spending leisure time socializing with friends. More students (49.7%) think narghile is more harmful than cigarettes compared to the opposite (30%), whereby students associate it mainly with respiratory disease. Family attitudes regarding tobacco use by their younger members were more permissive about narghile compared to cigarettes, and towards females smoking narghile compared to males. Non-cigarette smokers in this population opt not to mostly out of health concerns for non-narghile smokers, or out of dislike/disapprove of cigarettes for narghile smokers.

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