

Open Letter to Financial Secretary, Hong Kong SAR Government

Increasing Tobacco Tax to Achieve WHO Recommended Level Reduce Smoking Prevalence and Alleviate Public Healthcare System

Smoking prevalence in Hong Kong has declined from 23.3% in 1982 to 9.1% in 2023, which is one of the lowest globally. However, tobacco control efforts must not stagnate. Reducing the smoking population and achieving a smoke-free environment are objectives championed worldwide and also the direction of tobacco control for our country and Hong Kong. The Hong Kong SAR Government conducted a public consultation in 2023 with the aim to promptly initiating the new phase of tobacco control. A series of short-term, medium-term, and long-term tobacco control measures were proposed. Continuously reviewing the effectiveness of increasing tobacco duty and the pace of future adjustments is listed as one of the ten short-term tobacco control measures.

Raising tobacco tax is the single most effective tobacco control measure. The World Health Organization (WHO) explicitly prioritizes raising tobacco prices and tobacco taxation and recommends that the tax rate should constitute 75% or above of the retail price. Globally, 40 countries (such as Brazil, France, New Zealand, Thailand, and the United Kingdom) have already achieved this WHO-recommended tobacco tax level. However, tobacco tax rate in Hong Kong only accounts for approximately 63% of the cigarette price, demonstrating the necessity for continuous increases in tobacco taxation. In the past three years, tobacco tax has been increased twice. But the tobacco industry consecutively raised the cigarette prices annually by a cumulative total of HK\$17. This indicates that there is room for increment in cigarette price. Therefore, the government should promptly raise tobacco tax to the WHO-recommended level and adjust it annually to maintain that level, so as to sustainably reduce the affordability of tobacco products and enhance the effectiveness of cigarette prices in promoting smoking cessation more significantly.

Both local and international experiences demonstrated that raising tobacco tax effectively promotes smoking cessation and prevents smoking initiation. A comprehensive meta-analysis examined 476 studies that assessed the association between various tobacco control measures and smoking cessation, reduction in smoking prevalence and smoking consumption. It was found that raising tobacco tax respectively enhances the likelihood of successful quitting by 20%, attempt to quit by 35%, and intention to quit by 39%. In Hong Kong, following the increment of tobacco tax in 2023-24 and 2024-25, the number of calls to the smoking cessation hotline immediately surged

by more than threefold and twofold respectively. Compared with 2022, a more than 25% increase in the calls was recorded in 2024 while the number of smokers received smoking cessation counseling through government- subsidized organizations increased to 28,559 which was a 40% increase. These figures demonstrate the significant impact of tobacco taxation in promoting smoking cessation. Furthermore, smoking initiation predominantly occurs during adolescence. Adolescents are more sensitive to tobacco pricing. Hence, raising tobacco tax can effectively prevent them from initiating smoking.

Raising tobacco tax not only protects the public from smoking hazards but also safeguards the public healthcare system and facilitates social development. According to the latest academic research published by The University of Hong Kong (HKU), smoking led to nearly 13,900 deaths in Hong Kong in 2021 (of which more than 400 were attributable to exposure to secondhand smoke) and caused economic losses ranging from HK\$8.2 billion to HK\$10 billion. Therefore, implementing comprehensive tobacco control measures can prevent both life and economic losses caused by smoking, and increasing tobacco tax is the most effective and cost-efficient among all measures.

There is a direct association between smoking and the risk of developing chronic diseases. Vital Strategies, a global public health organization, published guidelines in September 2025 emphasizing that the implementation of health taxes can effectively reduce the use of harmful products (including tobacco, alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverages) and prevent non-communicable diseases. It recommends governments to implement health taxes on tobacco products and maintain high tax rates with automatic adjustment mechanisms to prevent them from becoming more affordable over time. Hong Kong's healthcare system is facing challenges from an aging population and rising rates of chronic diseases. According to data from the Hospital Authority, the per capita hospital service utilization rate for patients with chronic diseases in 2019 was three times higher than that of general patients, and the population with chronic diseases was projected to increase by 50% over the next 20 years, with an estimated three million people by 2039. The high smoking prevalence of middle-aged smokers will bring additional health risks, add additional stress and further deteriorate the burdensome healthcare system. Raising tobacco tax can effectively motivate more smokers to quit, and in the long term, reduce the rate of chronic diseases and alleviate the burden on public healthcare resources.

Continuous strengthening tobacco control is supported by the public and a wide spectrum of the society. There is also a broad community consensus in increasing tobacco tax. Results of the Vibrant, Healthy and Tobacco-free Hong Kong public consultation on tobacco control strategies conducted by Health Bureau in 2023 showed that over 90% of citizens supported the further reduction of smoking prevalence, and over 80% supported establishing an automatic adjustment mechanism on raising tobacco tax regularly. In addition, according to Tobacco Control Policy-related Survey 2025 conducted by COSH and HKU, over 70% of the respondents supported both a tobacco tax increase in the upcoming financial year and an annual tobacco tax increase. The results indicate the public agreement with raising tobacco tax and cigarette price to encourage quitting despite the increases in the two out of the previous three years. In addition, 25.8% of current smokers responded that if the tobacco retail price increases, they would either quit smoking or reduce smoking by at least half. They opined that the cigarette retail price should be set at a median price of HK\$150 and a mean price of HK\$163.8 per pack to effectively motivate smokers to quit, which are far above the current price of HK\$105.

Tobacco industry commonly exacerbates the illicit tobacco problem to obstruct effective tobacco control policies, particularly increasing tobacco tax. Both WHO and the World Bank stressed that increasing tobacco taxation has no direct relationship with illicit tobacco problem. The proliferation of the illicit tobacco markets is primarily attributable to multiple factors, including weak regulatory frameworks, poor tax administration, and a lack of deterrent measures. Past experiences shows that tax increases have not worsened illicit tobacco situations in Hong Kong. The Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) of the HKSAR stated that no associated illicit tobacco problem was observed following the 2014 tobacco tax increase. In March 2024, C&ED clarified that the quantity of illicit tobacco seized primarily reflected the effectiveness and intensity of the strengthened enforcement strategies, and did not represent an increase in illicit tobacco entering the local market. Tobacco prices are neither the sole nor the primary cause of illicit tobacco problems. In fact, the ten short-term tobacco control measures also include increasing penalties for duty-not-paid tobacco, implementing a duty stamp system for cigarettes, and requiring cigarettes sold at a price lower than the tobacco duty be proved duty-paid. We believe these measures can effectively address the illicit tobacco problem and have a complementary effect to raising tobacco tax in promoting smoking cessation.

Currently, there are still approximately 580,000 smokers in Hong Kong with male smoking prevalence remaining as high as 16.4%. Smoking-related diseases and economic losses impose a heavy burden on society and the public healthcare system. To safeguard citizens and the next generation from smoking hazards, strengthening tobacco control is a widely shared consensus across different sectors of the community. The passage of the Tobacco Control Legislation (Amendment) Ordinance 2025 (the Ordinance) in September 2025 marks an important milestone in launching the new phase of tobacco control. In order to achieve the objective of reducing smoking prevalence to 7.8% or lower, the government should expeditiously implement all the measures covered by the Ordinance, as well as the two short-term tobacco control measures not included in the Ordinance, i.e., adjusting tobacco taxation and strengthening smoking cessation services and smoke-free education, so as to effectively promote smoking cessation and prevent smoking initiation among young people.

COSH, in alliance with the medical profession, academia, education and social service sectors, parents, patients and smoking cessation groups, etc. urges the Hong Kong Government to raise tobacco tax in FY2026-27 to fulfill the 75% standard recommended by WHO and implement an annual adjustment mechanism (such as indexing to inflation or additional increases above inflation), to ensure the effectiveness of tobacco tax policy in promoting smoking cessation and uptake prevention, and avoid its impact being weakened by price manipulation from the tobacco industry and factors such as inflation. We also call for the establishment of target and timetable for smoke-free Hong Kong and due implementation of medium- and long-term tobacco control measures, such as banning smoking while walking, prohibiting the display of cigarette packs at points of sale, and introducing a “smoke-free generation” policy, so as to achieve a smoke-free Hong Kong as early as possible and safeguard public health.

This open letter is jointly submitted by Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health and 115 co-signatories.

30 January 2026

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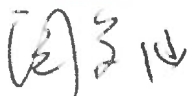


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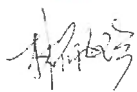


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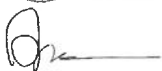
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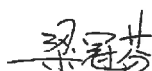
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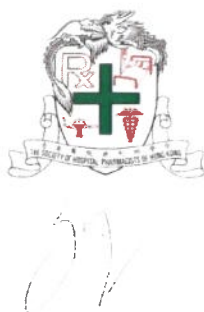
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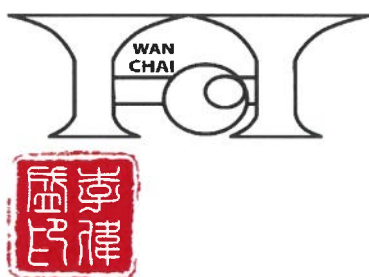
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