

SMOKING, ALCOHOL, OBESITY TAR EUROPE'S BILL OF HEALTH

'SMOKING RATES GOING DOWN, BUT OBESITY IS INCREASING'

LONDON: "Alarming" rates of smoking, alcohol consumption and obesity in Europe could mean the next generation live shorter lives, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned yesterday. While Europeans are living longer than ever before, increases in life expectancy and declines in premature mortality may "flatten off" if the three big lifestyle risk factors are not dealt with, a senior WHO director said. In a report on the region's health, the WHO said there remain "unacceptably high" differences in life expectancy between countries, with an 11-year gap between the highest and lowest.

The first study of its kind for three years, the report covers 39 countries including European Union member states as well as former Soviet republics. Levels of premature mortality from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) — including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases — are decreasing "quickly," the report said. But levels of alcohol consumption, tobacco use and obesity remain "alarmingly high" and this "could mean that this progress is not maintained," it warned.

"Europeans live long lives and healthy lives. We are the longest living region in the world," said Claudia Stein, a senior WHO director for Europe. But "the differences in health status between European countries are... inexplicably wide." "If rates of smoking and alcohol consumption and obesity do not decline we may risk the gains in life expectancy we have seen—which may

mean that the next generation may lead shorter lives than that we do."

World's biggest drinkers

Although rates of smoking and alcohol consumption are declining in many parts of the continent, Europeans still smoke and drink more than people anywhere else in the world, according to the WHO. It estimates that on average 11 liters of pure alcohol are drunk per person each year, while 30 percent of the population uses tobacco. Meanwhile obesity is increasing, with 59 percent of Europe's population either overweight or obese, ranking only slightly behind the Americas which have the highest rates in the world.

The European Health Report 2015 looked at progress made towards the WHO's "Health 2020" targets. Average life expectancy for men and women ranges from 71 in Belarus, Moldova and Russia to 82 for countries like France, Italy and Spain according to figures from 2011. The gap represents a fall of three years since 2009 and Europe is "on track" to exceed targets to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by at least 1.5 percent a year by 2020, the report said. But Stein said that there could be a "flattening off of the curve" affecting the next generation's life expectancy, if lifestyle risk factors are not addressed. "We think that the gains we see... the increases in life expectancy and the declines in premature mortality... may flatten off if these risk factors are not dealt with," said Stein. "It would be tragic if

the next generation did not at a minimum have a higher life expectancy than ours."

'War' on obesity

Some countries have seen a dramatic decline in smoking rates, notably Greece, Russia and Bulgaria, official figures show. Meanwhile obesity has tripled in many European countries since the 1980s, with 23 percent of Europeans now obese, according to the report. "Smoking rates are going down everywhere—we have very few exceptions—but obesity is increasing and one does not offset the other," Stein told AFP. "What we do not want to see is that we are winning the war against alcohol and smoking but losing the war against obesity." She said there were also "unacceptable" health inequalities to tackle.

Infant mortality has fallen to an all-time low but there remains a 10-fold difference between the highest and lowest countries, with 22 deaths per 1,000 births in Kyrgyzstan compared to two in Finland. "The differences between countries in life expectancy and mortality are shrinking. But the differences are still there and some of them are extreme," Stein said. This year's report also looked for the first time at the impact of "life satisfaction" on life expectancy. Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland—the four countries reporting the most "life satisfaction" according to polling data collected by Gallup—also have some of Europe's highest life expectancy rates. — AFP



WOLFSBURG, LOWER SAXONY, Germany: People arrive for work through the main gate of the headquarters of German car maker Volkswagen in Wolfsburg. —AFP

EXPOSING VEHICLE EMISSIONS PROBLEMS NOT NEW FOR UNIVERSITY

CHARLESTON: A West Virginia University research unit that helped expose Volkswagen AG's smog-test scandal had been involved in another emissions test two decades ago involving polluting trucks that had similar results. In October 1998, the WVU Center for Alternative Fuels, Engines and Emissions discovered that more than 1.1 million trucks whose heavy-duty diesel engines had passed emission inspections at the factory were polluting much more than allowed because of devices designed to overcome emissions controls, Dan Carder, interim director of the unit, told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The Justice Department publicly announced the findings, after which several manufacturers agreed to a \$1 billion settlement. In the Volkswagen case, the WVU research team was hired by nonprofit pollution control advocate International Council on Clean Transportation to measure emissions on three cars: a 2012 VW Jetta, a 2013 VW Passat and a BMW X5 SUV. The BMW passed, but the university found significantly higher emissions from the Volkswagens, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

The university and the council reported their findings to the EPA and the California Air Resources Board in May 2014, but VW blamed the problem on technical issues and unexpected conditions. The automaker even did a recall late last year, without much improvement, the EPA said. Only when the EPA and the California board refused to approve VW's 2016 diesel models for

sale did the company acknowledge putting stealth software in millions of its vehicles worldwide. In informing Volkswagen of the violations, the EPA and CARB cited WVU's research.

Because smog tests are almost always done on dynamometers, VW got away with the scheme for seven years, until the "clean transportation" advocates went to WVU, which tests emissions using equipment that fits in car trunks. Instead of doing the tests in West Virginia, researchers took their wares to the West Coast, where diesel cars were easy to find. At the CARB test facility, "these vehicles were performing just as we would imagine," Carder said. "It wasn't until we took them out onto the open road that we saw the discrepancies in their performance. You're putting these suitcase devices in the car and operating the car over the real-world driving cycle. We pioneered this work back in 1998."

Other work the nonprofit Center for Alternative Fuels Engines and Emissions has done over the years includes emissions research on tractor-trailer fleets for private companies, military combat and tactical ground vehicles for a defense contractor, and high-speed passenger ferries. The center has seven faculty members, five full-time staff engineers, five technicians, and more than 30 post-graduate students. It isn't supported by the state or university but relies on contracts with outside agencies and companies, typically between \$3 million to \$4 million annually, Carder said. —AP



NEW DELHI, India: An Indian livestock owner sits on a charpoy (rope bed) with a goat at a market ahead of the upcoming Eid Al-Adha festival in the old quarters. —AFP photos

INDIA'S GOAT SELLERS FLOCK TO THE INTERNET THIS EID

NEW DELHI: After decades of flocking to traditional livestock markets ahead of Eid, breeders in India are now heading online to haggle a good price for their prized animals. Goats, sheep and cows are slaughtered worldwide to celebrate the major Muslim festival of Eid Al-Adha, which throughout South Asia falls this year tomorrow. India's markets have long been bursting with breeders and buyers in the run up to Eid, with feverish negotiations for the thousands of specially bred animals.

But farmers said they were increasingly moving to India's popular online classified portals like Quikr and Olx, for easier and stress-free sales. "I am getting 10 to 15 calls every day," Qaiser Khan, from the northern desert state of Rajasthan said. Khan said he usually travelled to markets throughout Rajasthan in the lead up to Eid, keeping him away from home for weeks. But this year he has sold half a dozen goats online, including one for 250,000 rupees (\$3,800).

"This is also hassle free for customers. We deliver to their doorstep. Most of my friends are selling their livestock online," Khan said, adding that his most prized goat has been fed almonds and milk for the last year. A search of the sites shows a multitude of photos of "premium" and "big black" goats on offer. Those camped out at a traditional market in New Delhi's old city shrugged off the online competition, saying customers preferred to see animals in the flesh before choosing one.

"Sales are yet to pick up, but there will be no impact on our business," Juma Shah, from north-

ern Moradabad city said. "The goats sold online are costlier than (those at) this market," he added. Altamash Qureshi, who is selling four goats for a whopping four million rupees (\$60,600) in total, said online shopping lacked the charm of traditional markets. "The market has got its own

charm and nothing can match it. I am getting customers for the goats amid this muck and foul smell," he said. Muslims sacrifice livestock on Eid and share the meat with family, friends and the poor to commemorate Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son Ismail on Allah's request. — AFP



NEW DELHI, India: An Indian livestock trader feeds his goat at a market ahead of the upcoming Eid Al-Adha festival in the old quarters.

PFIZER SAYS IT COULD BE LEADER IN CANCER WITH MANY DRUGS

NEW YORK: Drug giant Pfizer is starting 20 clinical trials this year and more soon after on treatments to conquer cancer as it also seeks to gain leadership in one of the hottest, and most lucrative, areas of medicine. A decade ago, the world's second-biggest drugmaker by revenue wasn't even a player in cancer medicine. Instead, it was known for erectile dysfunction treatment Viagra and blockbuster cholesterol fighter Lipitor.

New York-based Pfizer Inc. then chose to make cancer one of its core research areas, pitting it against cancer powerhouses including Novartis AG, Roche Holding AG, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. and Merck & Co. Today, Pfizer has eight approved cancer medicines, four of them launched in the last four years. It's running late-stage patient tests on five of those drugs for additional uses, has three other drugs in late-stage testing — usually the last round before seeking regulators' approval — and has 14 other drug programs in early stages.

Those programs together provide for a two-pronged attack on cancer, including tumor-killing drugs and treatments in the promising new class called immuno-oncology that stimulate the immune system to mount a stronger defense against cancer. Scientists "have never been closer to finding a cancer cure," Mikael Dolsten, Pfizer's head of worldwide research and development, told journalists Tuesday during an update on the company's cancer research strategy.

Different mechanisms

"Compared to other companies, we are uniquely positioned to be a leader" in cancer, Dolsten added. He and other Pfizer executives said that's because killing tumors and preventing cancer recurrence requires regimens of multiple drugs given together or sequentially, and the company has many drugs that work by different mechanisms to try together. "They clearly have the scale and R&D experience over time to be a major player in the immuno-oncology market," said Edward Jones analyst Ashtyn Evans. "We've seen them do a lot in a short time." "They're still pretty far behind Merck and Bristol in immuno-oncology," she added, "but it's going to be a large market that will have room for multiple players."

Evans said Pfizer's best prospect is its newest

drug, breast cancer medicine Ibrance, now being tested against multiple other cancers. She thinks by 2020 Pfizer could boost its cancer drug sales to about 10 percent of revenue, up from barely 4 percent of its \$50 billion in annual revenue now. Asked about the high prices for cancer medicines, given that patients receive multiple treatments, Liz Barrett, head of cancer drug marketing, told reporters Pfizer will be looking at pricing for combinations of its drugs and noted the company gives away billions of dollars of its medicines.

Patients and insurance plans increasingly are raising alarms about prices of around \$100,000 a year for new drugs for cancer and some other conditions, plus recent huge price hikes for some old drugs. Now Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, the Vermont senator, have made them campaign issues with proposals to let Americans buy cheaper drugs overseas, bring the federal government bigger discounts on drugs it buys and even make insurance plans cap what patients pay for their medication.

Scientific insights

Pfizer's scientists now are collaborating more internally and have numerous partnerships with university researchers uncovering scientific insights and with other pharmaceutical and biotech companies, said Mace Rothenberg, a senior vice president who oversees Pfizer's efforts to discover potential cancer treatments. Those partnerships range from one with iTeos Therapeutics giving Pfizer rights to two compounds in laboratory testing to one testing rival Merck's immuno-oncology drug Keytruda with two approved Pfizer drugs and an experimental one.

Dolsten and other Pfizer executives said the key to better treatments is putting together the best targeted drug combinations and, before testing them in people, seeing how well they work on animals manipulated to have tumors with the same genetic variations as the patients they're hoping to help. Pfizer's cancer research programs include ones using six different types of technology to target tumor cells, from genetically engineered antibodies to therapeutic vaccines, which use patients' own tumor cells to create vaccines personalized to the genetic characteristics of their cancer. —AP

CLINTON TAKES ON BIG PHARMA, LAYS OUT DRUG PLAN

WASHINGTON: Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton unveiled a plan Tuesday to limit prescription medicine costs, challenging the US pharmaceutical industry after the price for one drug skyrocketed by 5,000 percent. The United States has no government-led universal health care program for all its nationals. At least 33 million Americans have no health insurance whatsoever, government data show. Clinton's plan would allow for Medicare, the national health insurance program set up specifically for people over 65, "to negotiate for lower prices for its members," a move she said would save some \$100 billion per year.

The problem of rising drug prices affects millions of Americans. The majority are covered by private insurance plans offered by employers for workers and their dependents. And even with overall US health care costs trending slightly lower, prescription drug costs for consumers have shot up by more than 12 percent last year, according to Clinton. Even senior citizens with Medicare often pay part

of their medical expenses. So the issue is one that resonates with many voters. Many aged Americans go bankrupt paying for their medical care, and cut pills in half to make prescriptions last longer, while the uninsured in their millions usually get little care until they have to head to an emergency room.

Health care costs worrisome

The health care costs issue has been simmering in the early months of the US presidential race. But it catapulted into the national spotlight on Monday, when Clinton reacted to a company that raised by 50-fold the price of a drug used by AIDS and cancer patients and others with compromised immune systems. Clinton's outrage over prescription drug "price-gouging," and her vow to "lay out a plan to take it on," sent pharmaceutical and biotechnology stocks into a four-percent slide Monday. In Iowa the next day, she announced her plan that would cap out-of-pocket drug

costs for working families at \$250 per month for covered medications. It would require pharmaceutical companies to spend a certain portion of their revenue on research and development, and would aim to cut down on direct-to-consumer advertising by companies that receive substantial federal tax breaks. "I want to both protect consumers and promote innovation, while putting an end to profiteering," she said. She also vowed to end the ban on US consumers purchasing US-made drugs from countries that sell them for less than in the United States.

End ban on cheap Rx imports

"If the medicine you need costs less in Canada you should be able to buy it from Canada, or any other country that meets our safety standards," she said. The United States' neighbor to the north has nation health insurance for all; the huge scope of "economies of scale" usually lowers costs, including for medications. Clinton also returned to the issue

of the company of the moment, Turing Pharmaceuticals, which in August purchased the rights to a 60-year-old drug, Daraprim, and soon afterward raised its price 50-fold, from \$13.50 per pill to \$750. "That's price-gouging, pure and simple," Clinton said, without mentioning the company by name.

Daraprim fights toxoplasmosis, one of the most common food-borne diseases. It often infects people with immune systems that have been weakened HIV and AIDS, or from chemotherapy. Turing's chief executive, Martin Shkreli, defended the price hike, saying his firm was taking a money-losing drug and turning into a profit-maker that would spur more research and innovation. "We're taking the revenue from Daraprim and trying to come up with a better, safer, more effective version of it," Shkreli told CNBC on Monday. As for the new price tag, he said "we took it to a price where we can make a comfortable profit but not any ridiculous profit." — AFP