

• By JUDY SIEGEL

Health Ministry: IDF taking profits from sale of cigarettes to soldiers

MK Glick: We must have a tobacco-free army



IDF SOLDIERS take a smoking break during a training exercise in the Negev in June 2014. (Reuters)

There's a good reason why the IDF – aware of the damage caused to soldiers who smoke – doesn't stop the sale of tobacco products on all its bases and in all its offices: It makes money from them.

A discussion of the problem of smoking in the military on Monday in the Knesset Anti-Drug Committee revealed that the IDF has no economic interest in prohibiting the sale of tobacco, because base commanders collect for various activities between 30% and 40% of the proceeds. Haim Geva of the Health Ministry said each base may net tens of thousands of shekels a year from selling cigarettes – at a time when the IDF bemoans the fact that many soldiers start smoking during military service, causing their health to suffer.

Committee head MK Tamar Zandberg (Meretz) said that another session will be held in four months to further discuss the subject, including the sale of cigarettes in the military, the need to increase enforcement of rules limiting smoking and increasing information campaigns for soldiers. If tobacco became less accessible and advertising of products disappeared, smoking would be reduced, she said.

Zandberg asked IDF representatives to encode the various disciplinary violations regarding smoking and drinking alcohol and provide data in the next few months to the committee, so it can examine the phenomenon. She added that she was “not impressed” that the IDF is doing enough to stop tobacco use among soldiers.

A combat soldier is more likely to start smoking in the IDF, but smokers have a reduced chance of finishing basic combat training. Those who smoke take more days off and use 40% more medical services than those who don't light up. Forty percent of male soldiers smoke when they are discharged, compared to 32 of women soldiers.

Dr. Eilon Glazberg, head of health services in the IDF, told the committee that soldiers who go on to the professional army smoke half the amount of those who are discharged after completing mandatory service. “It would be hard to find a senior officer or brigade commander who smokes,” he added.

Dr. Hagai Levine, an epidemiologist at the Hebrew University-Hadassah School of Public Health and Community Medicine, presented details of his recent published study involving tens of thousands of soldiers and their smoking habits. “We discovered a significant increase in soldiers who smoke from their enlistment to discharge,” he said. Levine added that the Israel Medical Association suggests a number of activities, some based on those in the US military, to prevent smoking among soldiers.

“We need a central body with an organized program. Barring smoking on bases except for a few smoking corners in distant and hidden places would help. Reducing the military profile of soldiers who smoke should be considered. Army service

is a golden opportunity to prevent smoking,” he said.

Likud MK Yehudah Glick recalled his army service, when anyone who didn't smoke was “considered a sissy. We must have a tobacco-less IDF. What was once thought to be legitimate should not be allowed today.”

IDF chief nurse Maj. Oshrat Gozlan said that trends in the IDF “reflect

those in general society. Smoking is not something we can ignore. We have various programs, such as SMS messages to soldiers that encourage them to kick the habit, and a quarter who get them in fact quit smoking. We provide free drugs to soldiers to help them quit. We have dozens of soldiers who run cessation courses, and the number of participants

rises from year to year.”

Dr. Avital Peto Ben-Ari, a health promoter in the Israel Cancer Association, said that the major expense of buying cigarettes especially weighs on those from weak socioeconomic backgrounds and widens the gap. “The IDF has the ability to change this using orders and enforcement,” he said.