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# Cancer association director-general: Strictly enforce no-smoking laws

*Ahead of World No Tobacco Day on Saturday, health minister says country's smoking rate is 'lowest ever' but report's age limit was raised, affecting result*

• By JUDY SIEGEL

In the smoking report that must by law be presented to the Knesset speaker every year for World No Tobacco Day on May 31, Health Minister Yael German declared on Wednesday that the smoking rate among people aged 21 and over has reached its "lowest ever" – 18.7 percent in 2013 compared to 20.6% in 2012.

German wrote in her introduction that the findings of the current report provide hope that the struggle against smoking is beginning to bear fruit – as one can see from the lower smoking rate [determined by the poll]. It is a Sisyphean struggle that the Health Ministry is leading to reduce smoking and its damage."

But the minister, in her written introduction of the 156-page report, did not say that the new low was due partly to the raising of the age of those polled from 18 a few years ago to 20.6 last year to 21 today.

The high smoking rate of new inductees in the army at the age of 18 raises the figures, while those who are over 21 and already civilians smoke less, thus changing the results. According to the report, 33.8% of soldiers who enlisted in 2009 smoked, while after they were discharged, only 29.3% of them smoked.

In addition, public-health experts have declared that the two main factors for smoking reduction are significant hikes in tobacco taxes, which the Finance Ministry carried out during the past year, as well as serious enforcement of existing no-smoking laws, which the Health Ministry has consistently conceded is not being carried out by the local authorities.

Although the municipalities have inspectors who are supposed to fine violators of no-smoking laws, they spend most of their

time dealing with other issues so not to encounter potentially indignant smokers.

Israel Cancer Association director-general Miri Ziv told *The Jerusalem Post* in response to the report that "smoking is the number-one preventable cause of mortality, with 9,000 deaths a year – many more than those killed in road accidents, terrorism and military encounters. Even though the government of Israel ratified the World Health Organization's 2003 Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, it has still not implemented numerous provisions."

These include the prohibition of any advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products, regulation of the contents of tobacco products and the prevention of sales to and by minors.

The Health Ministry did outlaw cigarette vending machines in the past year and reduced the number of duty-free cigarette packages that can be purchased at airports and ports from two to one per trip, but it did not eliminate the tax-free privileges to travelers as set down by the FCTC. About five years ago, smoking-cessation courses and drugs were added to the basket of health services provided to all residents.

However, although the Health Ministry pushed through a law two years ago barring smoking at all bus stations that have roofs over them, it has still not issued regulations for signs and other conditions for enforcement, so no fines have been handed out to violators.

In addition, although it is forbidden to smoke on the full length of outdoor stations of Jerusalem's Light Rail, which has 140,000 passengers daily, no city inspectors have handed out fines of NIS 1,000 per smoked cigarette, cigar or pipe, despite hundreds of cigarettes lit up there every day.

Although previous smoking reports contained lists of dozens of municipalities and the number of fines they handed out to violators to indicate which cities were more vigorous in enforcement, there are no such statistics in the new document.

The ICA director said that the government, led by the Health Ministry, must take more vigorous action to ensure that existing laws are enforced, as "smoking is the No. 1 public health issue, and bringing it down to a minimum will save thousands of lives."

Although all health ministers since 2003 have held press conferences to present the smoking report and answer reporters' questions, German did not hold one last year, and none will be held this year. Asked why, German's spokeswoman said that "no health reporters except that of *The Jerusalem Post* was willing to come."

Requests for a short personal interview by the *Post* was initially approved but then turned down due to the minister's "lack of time."

According to the report, the rate of former smokers – 19.1% – is higher than those who still smoke. The rate of adults who say they have never smoked is the "highest recorded in both the Jewish and Arab sectors."

The report also said that the continued rise in tobacco taxes has reduced the number of cigarette packs and other tobacco products sold.

But the high price of ready-made cigarettes has encouraged many smokers to buy paper and tobacco and roll them by themselves; these products have lower taxes that must be raised to discourage smoking, it said.

Tobacco companies, both local and foreign, invested a record-high NIS 61 million in 2012 to promote sales.