

15TH WORLD CONFERENCE ON TOBACCO OR HEALTH SINGAPORE, 20–24 MARCH 2012

Singapore, 20 March 2012: In a major milestone for Singapore in the fight against smoking, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong officially opened the 15th World Conference on Tobacco or Health (WCTOH) in the presence of some of the world's most influential leaders.

Present at the opening ceremony were Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organisation; Dr Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General, ASEAN; Health Ministers and national representatives from ASEAN, Australia, Fiji, Norway, Russia, Turkey and the USA; as well as renowned technical experts Prof Judith Mackay, Prof Sir Richard Peto and Dr Prakash C Gupta.

Declaring the conference open, Mr Gan said that Singapore, as a signatory (PARTY) to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), is keen to establish, engage and support local, regional and international partnerships for tobacco control.

"The tobacco epidemic is one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced. It kills nearly six million people a year. This is why tobacco control is one of the top priorities in Singapore's public health efforts. We believe the linkages formed through this important platform of WCTOH 2012 will enable diverse groups to come together to take a collective stand against tobacco and save more lives," Mr Gan said.

As host of the 15th WCTOH, Singapore has distinguished itself as one of the region's leading advocates against tobacco use. The Conference was hosted in Southeast Asia for the first time, and about 2,600 international delegates and policy-makers from 100 countries have participated. The buzz generated affirms the city-state as a thought leader on tobacco control while raising local awareness of tobacco control issues.

"Singapore is the first in the world to impose duty-paid marking on cigarettes to counter illicit trade, the first in Asia to make graphic health warnings mandatory and also a global forerunner in having a comprehensive smoke-free ban," said Mr Ang Hak Seng, Chief Executive Officer, Singapore's Health Promotion Board (HPB).

The key player in the Conference, HPB has driven tobacco control and health initiatives locally for more than a decade. Representing HPB's efforts, Mr Ang said: "While Singapore has one of the lowest rates of smoking in the world at about 14 per cent, we aim to bring our nation's smoking prevalence to below 10 per cent by 2020. To achieve this, we need to go beyond top-down legislation and mobilise our community to lead the way in 'de-normalising' smoking. This we will do by converting smokers to smoke-free advocates, selling the business value of a smoke-free environment to entrepreneurs, and promoting smoke-free public spaces and neighbourhoods."

Singapore's distinct approach is in line with this year's conference theme, 'Towards a Tobacco-Free World: Planning Globally, Acting Locally', which is strategically focused on planning and coordination of multi-sectoral tobacco control efforts at the international level, while customising local policies and programmes to suit the unique requirements of individual countries.

In a hard-hitting keynote address, Dr Chan said the tobacco industry is engaged in an all-out effort to subvert tobacco control laws: "Tactics aimed at undermining anti-tobacco campaigns, and subverting the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, are no longer covert or cloaked by an image of corporate social responsibility. They are out in the open and they are extremely aggressive. We can, and must, stop this industry's massive contribution to sickness and death."

WCTOH is one of the world's most prestigious platforms on tobacco control, where the best and most dedicated experts and leaders congregate for debate, exchange of perspectives and overall pursuit of greater solidarity against tobacco use.

The overall objectives of WCTOH:

- Provide a platform to build countries' capacity in tobacco control through the sharing of best practices, experiences, knowledge and research
- Strengthen the next generation of tobacco control advocates through a youth pre-conference and the participation of youth delegates at the main conference
- Renew the commitment to fight the global tobacco epidemic through the conference declaration
- Initiate greater collaborations, especially in the region, to counter the tobacco epidemic
- Share with the rest of the world Singapore's unique approach to tobacco control
- Learn from international experts and build the capacity of local tobacco control advocates.

For more detailed information see: <http://wctoh2012.org/nav-home.html>

For 15th World Conference on Tobacco or Health Declaration see: <http://wctoh2012.org/nav-declaration.html>

Health Promotion Board. Press release. World's leading tobacco control conference opens in Singapore [Internet]. Singapore: Health Promotion Board; 2012 [cited 2012 Mar 26]. Available from: http://wctoh2012.org/Media_Release_Opening_Ceremony_20_Mar_2012.pdf.