

NPO seeks to keep kids off tobacco

Doctor details dangers, slams official smoking interests' clout

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OSAKA — In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of a law that prohibits minors from smoking, a nonprofit organization working to create a smoke-free environment for children compiled a book last month to educate children and adults about the ill-effects of tobacco.

The group's chairman, Dr. Takashi Takemura, 77, says people are unaware what smoking and passive smoking can do to their health.

"Although many people say they know smoking is bad for health, they do not know how serious the effects are," Takemura says.

For instance, the death rate from lung cancer among

Free Environment for Children), which was set up in August 1988, works to educate pupils and students at schools by holding picture and slogan contests concerning smoking manners and the ill-effects of smoking. The prize-winning works are distributed for display at schools, hospitals and railway stations.

Although Japan introduced the law in 1900 to not only ban minors from smoking but also to prohibit people from selling tobacco to minors, it no longer works, as an increasing number of minors smoke.

According to a 1996 study by the Institute of Public Health, about 30 percent of male students and about 17 percent of female students in the first year of junior high school had



DR. TAKASHI TAKEMURA, chairman of a citizens' group working to create smoke-free environments for children, speaks on tobacco use in Japan. KIMIO IDA PHOTO

resisting that trend. The Health and Welfare Ministry last month dropped plans to halve the rate of adult smokers as well as overall tobacco consumption by 2010 due to strong pressures from politicians and tobacco growers.

Takemura says the ministry's move was no surprise.

"As long as the Finance Ministry has power over tobacco business, the Welfare Ministry alone cannot do much," he says.

Although the tobacco industry was privatized in 1985, the government still holds two-thirds of the shares of Japan Tobacco Inc. A tobacco business law states that it aims to promote tobacco business in order to secure stable tax revenues and to contribute to the development of the national economy. Tobacco tax revenues are estimated to reach ¥2.34 trillion in fiscal 2000, which began April 1, according to the Finance Ministry.

Even though the smoking situation is not getting any better, Takemura is not pessimistic about the future.

"The World Health Organization is taking tobacco-free initiatives, which may impose pressure on the Japanese government," he says, referring to the WHO's ongoing work of drawing up the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, an international legal instrument that tries to restrict global tobacco consumption. "Things could also change if a series of lawsuits are filed against the tobacco industry and the government, as seen in the U.S."

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smokers is four times that of nonsmokers. The cancer-related death rate of a non-smoking spouse of a smoker goes up in accordance with the number of cigarettes smoked by the partner.

The first half of the 160-page book, published by Shuppan Bunkasha Co., is a comic story, and the second half describes the law, tobacco-related situations in Japan and abroad, the group's activities and its policy proposals.

The group Kodomo ni Muen Kankyo wo Suishin Kyogikai (Council to Promote a Smoke-

experienced smoking. Among high school seniors, 25 percent of male students and 7 percent of female students smoke every day.

Takemura says that banning minors from smoking is important not only because of health problems but also to curb the number of adult smokers, because two-thirds of smokers are said to have started puffing in their teens.

In order to make it difficult for minors to have access to tobacco, Takemura wants restrictions on advertisements and on vending machines —

there are more than 500,000 machines in operation throughout the country.

"It is very problematic that there are so many vending machines in this country from which anybody can buy tobacco," he says.

In fact, the same survey by the Institute of Public Health found that 74 percent of male high school seniors who smoke said they buy tobacco from vending machines.

In his gynecology practice,

Takemura used to stress the ill-effects of smoking to pregnant women. He discussed the issue in a small booklet that used to be distributed free to all pregnant women at hospitals and clinics. Takemura says pregnant women who smoke face larger risks of having a miscarriage and premature births than nonsmokers.

While other industrialized nations are cracking down on tobacco, Japan appears to be