



Preventing an EPIDEMIC

Georgia State's Michael Eriksen works to curtail tobacco use in Africa

In a continent plagued by HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases, Georgia State's Michael Eriksen is working to help Africa avoid an epidemic that's completely preventable — diseases caused by smoking.

Eriksen, director of Georgia State's Institute of Public Health, is partnering with African nations and other non-governmental organizations to prevent tobacco use and its often fatal complications.

"Africa is the last place on earth where smoking is not fully entrenched," says Eriksen. "It's the last place where smoking has not been part of the culture, and it's where we have the potential to keep it out."

As part of a \$125 million project spearheaded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Eriksen's four-year endeavor is taking him to Kenya, Zambia and Ghana to help these countries discourage the addictive habit and avoid a potential public health catastrophe.

Eriksen, former director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health, is collaborating with the World Health Organization, the World Bank and other organizations in the effort. He's also using resources and relationships at home in Atlanta, such as the CDC, the American Cancer Society and Georgia State Master of Public Health students.

Compared to people in developed nations, Africans use tobacco at very low rates, with 20 percent of men — and even fewer women — reporting that they smoke.

Data suggest, however, that more and more African youth are taking up the habit. If this trend isn't halted, African nations may face growing numbers of people with problems like emphysema, lung cancer and heart disease, Eriksen says.

To make matters worse, smoking weakens immune systems already degraded by diseases like HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Altogether, smoking's effects would place an even greater strain on Africa's public health resources — resources already pushed to the limit.

Increased smoking could also present economic difficulties, Eriksen says, as money spent on cigarettes would be better used for food.

The prevention effort is based on sharing knowledge and collaboration, rather than dictating what nations should do to help prevent smoking and use of other tobacco products, Eriksen says.

Governments can use several measures to discourage smoking, including more education, raising excise taxes on tobacco products and passing indoor smoking laws.

Eriksen points out that public health professionals often use media campaigns in developed nations like the United States to help change social attitudes toward smoking and show negative health effects, but it's not clear that similar efforts would work on a continent where smoking isn't the norm in the first place. Campaigns emphasizing freedom and independence might be more effective in African countries, he says.

And as the battle against smoking in Africa ensues, tobacco companies — just like in the United States — are fighting prevention efforts, throwing large financial and other resources toward impeding proactive anti-smoking efforts.

"There's a war going on for Africa's hearts and lungs," Eriksen says.

—Jeremy Craig



CARDY RICHARDSON/STAFF

Smoke stopper: Michael Eriksen is working to stamp out smoking in Africa before it becomes part of the culture on the continent.

Tobacco's Global Toll

According to the second edition of *The Tobacco Atlas* (which Eriksen co-authored), worldwide tobacco use killed 4.8 million people prematurely in 2000. If this trend continues, tobacco will kill about 10 million people a year by 2020. Disproportionately, 7 million of those deaths will be among users in the developing world.

Eriksen's work in Africa is part of a larger global effort to stem tobacco deaths across the globe, including in the emerging economic powers of China and India. Use in China is especially problematic, with its 1 billion-plus population consuming more than 30 percent of the world's cigarettes.

