

# Life Hosts Pan American Conference on Tobacco Control

Editorial Staff

Sixty delegates representing Pan American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) gathered April 14-16 at Life University to mobilize action and interest in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The meeting was co-sponsored by Life University and the Pan American Health Organization, which is the regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO).

The vast majority of smokers are from developing countries, or an estimated 800 million of the world's 1.1 billion smokers. The WHO estimates four million deaths a year from tobacco use, a figure expected to climb to 10 million by 2020; 70 percent of those deaths will occur in developing countries.

In response to this dire health trend, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director-general of the WHO, established the Tobacco Free Initiative in July 1998 to coordinate a global strategic response to tobacco as an important public health issue. From that initiative came the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The resolution to develop the FCTC was unanimously backed by the 191-member World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, in May of 1999, and representatives from 50 nations took the floor to pledge their financial and political support.

The FCTC has formed a working group to develop an agenda. The working group has already met twice, in October 1999 and in March 2000. The FCTC seeks to be a "new legal instrument" to: protect the world's youth from tobacco products; control smuggling; assist in diversifying agriculture in regions that depend on tobacco crops; create an advertising ban; strengthen the involvement of women; and regulate tobacco products.

The Latin American countries that sent NGO representatives to the meeting at Life University were: Bolivia; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Honduras; Mexico; Panama; Peru; Uruguay; and Venezuela. The Caribbean nations of Jamaica and Barbados also sent representatives. The NGOs represented from North America were: the American Heart Association; INFACT (a grassroots corporate watchdog organization based in the U.S.); Washington Cancer Institute; International Council of Nurses; International Chiropractic Association; Physicians for a Smoke-free Canada; InterAmerican Heart Foundation; World Federation of Chiropractic; American Cancer Society; National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids; Advocacy Institute; Oral Health America; World Health Organization; American Lung Association; and the International Council of Women.

The conferees were welcomed by Heather Selin of the Pan American Health Organization, and by Dr. Sid Williams, founder and president of Life University. Ms. Selin presented the objectives of the meeting, followed by Karen Lewis (of the WHO Tobacco Free Initiative), who outlined the background, goals and timetable of the FCTC. Other speakers and topics for the first day, included: Michael Pertschuk (Advocacy Institute): "Why Advocacy by NGOs is Critical"; and Judy Wilkenfeld (Nat'l Center for Tobacco Free Kids): "Possible Elements of a Framework Convention." There were also panel

presentations: Representatives from Honduras and Jamaica presented "The Role of NGOs in Latin American and the Caribbean," and delegates from Canada and Costa Rica offered "Government Perspectives on the FCTC."

Delegates later met in small group sessions to develop strategic plans. Mr. Pertschuk and Elmer Huerta (Washington Cancer Institute) facilitated the group discussions. One of the goals of the FCTC is to rally support and create worldwide awareness of its agenda. The discussion groups further produced several recommendations in common: political mapping; creating alliances with other NGOs and organizations/professions associated with health care; and to create networks to keep the information flowing.

In her concluding comments, Ms. Selin reiterated the importance of bringing other interest groups on board to assist with the FCTC: "An important ally is the chiropractic profession - not just for this meeting, but for all health care issues. It is imperative for us to maintain and build mutually-beneficial relationships with organizations that will assist our causes, and Life University is one of them."

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is a work in progress, but the goal is an international treaty that is legally binding. In May 2000, the World Health Assembly will again meet in Geneva; in October 2000, intergovernmental negotiations begin, with the working group meeting twice to devise potential draft elements of the FCTC, protocols, technical aspects and assess the political feasibilities of such a treaty. It is anticipated that the World Health Assembly will adopt the FCTC in May of 2003.

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