

SMOKELESS TOBACCO COULD SAVE ITALIAN LUNGS by Dominic Standish

(ANSA) - Padua, December 15 - Smokeless tobacco could help 18 million Italian smokers give up cigarettes and so lessen their chances of developing heart disease or cancer, according to new research.

The benefits of smokeless tobacco - such as the chewing variety or tobacco snuff - were discussed at a conference organised by the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) in Padua recently.

Dr. Philip Tonnesen, a Danish researcher, admitted there were some risks but said snuff could be a valid way of helping hardcore smokers cut down when other methods of treatment failed.

An article in the latest edition of the journal 'Tobacco Control' also had good things to say about smokeless tobacco. It is "substantially less harmful" than regular cigarettes and can be used to help quit smoking, it said.

The article was based on evidence from Sweden and was co-authored by anti-smoking activists, including Clive Bates from the Britain's Action on Smoking and Health.

The most popular kinds of smokeless tobacco are chewing tobacco and oral snuff, which is placed under the lip or in the cheek to absorb nicotine. Nasal snuff is now rare.

Tobacco snuff is popular among men in Scandinavia, where it is known as Snus. According to a study conducted in northern Sweden, Snus was the main factor helping men there stop smoking.

Statistics also show that Swedish males have much lower rates of lung cancer than their peers in other EU countries. Swedish women, who rarely use Snus, have lung cancer rates comparable to other Scandinavian females.

Snus is banned in other European Union countries, including Italy, where smoking results in 90,000 deaths from lung and cardiovascular disease and 35,000 new cases of lung cancer each year.

But while smokeless tobacco could reduce incidences of lung cancer, doctors have raised concerns about other health risks. Snuff increases the heart rate, raises blood pressure and is addictive.

Other health risks from smokeless tobacco have also been debated, including gum disease, dental problems, mouth lesions and oral cancers.

American professor Dr Brad Rodu, who conducted the Swedish research, believes the chances of getting mouth

cancer from smokeless tobacco are less than half what they are from normal smoking.

Still, European politicians have invoked the precautionary principle - better safe than sorry - to justify an EU ban on Snus until further research has been carried out.

But the EU ban now faces two lawsuits. The main producer of Snus, Swedish Match, and a German tobacco distributor have presented legal challenges that could lead to changes in the regulation of smokeless tobacco.

At the same time, experts are calling for more research in the area - a call that was repeated with force at the SRNT conference in Padua.

RED

15-DIC-03 16:00 NNNN