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Tob. Control 2009;18;419
doi:10.1136/tc.2009.031997

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Japanese street smoking bans: a Japan Tobacco foil to prevent clean indoor air policy?

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Received 4 June 2009
Accepted 5 June 2009

A recent visit to Japan had me wondering if I had not landed in a tobacco control topsy-turvy land. In restaurants and bars in Tokyo, people smoked at will. But on the streets in several local government areas of Tokyo, many signs on footpaths in both Japanese and English (fig 1) declared that smoking on the street was banned. Smoking is also prohibited at taxi ranks and inside taxis (fig 2), but smokers can gather in common signed smoking areas in the street (fig 3) and extinguish their butts in prominent Japan Tobacco-sponsored litterbins.

The first temptation is to see this as nothing more than a manifestation of Japanese preoccupation with cleanliness and tidiness. With Tokyo streets being extremely crowded, concerns about burns arising from lit cigarettes have added traction to the policy (see <http://www.conbinibento.com/photos/index.php?gallery=.%2FSmoking%20Manners>). Recycling bins are everywhere and litter and graffiti almost absent, so perhaps it's easy to think of Japan's apparent greater concern with litter than with health as an interesting cultural phenomenon.

But Japanese tobacco control leaders I met saw a far more worrying dimension to this peculiarity. Japan Tobacco at first aggressively opposed the move to ban smoking in streets but then negotiated with Chiyoda City to change the slogan associated with the development from the initial "From manners to rules" into "From manners to rules, and then to

manners", emphasising that the issue was being settled through courtesy, not via regulation.

Senior Japan Tobacco representatives have been enthusiastic supporters of the street smoking bans, while maintaining staunch opposition to indoor smoking bans. Dr Yumiko Mochizuki of Japan's National Cancer Centre suggests that the industry's intense support of the policy may suggest it sees street bans as an important foil to hold off indoor bans. Because of the smaller number of cumulative "smoking hours" available, the number of cigarettes forgone because of street smoking bans would be incomparably smaller than would be caused by indoor workplace bans, including those in bars and restaurants. By supporting street bans, Japan Tobacco would calculate that it could ride the popular wave of Japanese anti-litter sentiment, basking in civic-minded corporate social responsibility. In doing so, it helps contribute to the continuing framing of public smoking as an issue of manners and consideration, cleanliness and safety, while its role in chronic disease is sidelined. Mochizuki argues that the Japanese model may well be being promoted as the way to go elsewhere in the often crowded cities of Asia.

Competing interests: None.

Provenance and peer review: Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.



Figure 1. No smoking sign on pavement.



Figure 2. Yellow taxi with no smoking sign on the rear door.



Figure 3. People smoking in the street.