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Award Ceremonies: "The Smoke Free Prize"

Ladies and gentlemen,

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It is an honour to address you all here today, on 31 May, World No Tobacco Day, and to present the "2001 Smoke Free Award" to Gerd-Liv Valla, the first woman leader of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, and Jens Hoel, President of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union. This prize is bestowed upon them for their tireless efforts, insight and courage to stand up to protect the health of the citizens of this country from the threat of tobacco.

In just one year, at the head of this country's labour movement, Gerd-Liv Valla has succeeded in raising the issue of protecting workers from second-hand smoke to the forefront of political and public debate. She has pointed out that smoke-free environments are an obvious right - as obvious as the right not to be exposed to other poisonous chemicals or health hazards in the work environment. She has strongly contributed to a deeper understanding of tobacco as a serious problem in the workplace.

Of course, tobacco control is not a new debate in Norway. Almost 30 years ago, Norway set the standard by banning tobacco advertising. From the very beginning, the world has watched Norway to see how cutting edge tobacco control measures would work - public health advocates and tobacco companies alike. The measures have worked. Smoking prevalence and tobacco sales have dropped since the ban was put in place. Neither the press nor the advertising industry suffered the terrible setbacks that were predicted by those who were against.

The last quarter of a century saw the advent of strong measures concerning health warnings, increased minimum purchasing age, tax increases, and bans on promotion and indirect advertising as well as on vending machines.

But we must not rest on our laurels. To see continued reduction in the numbers of smokers, we need to be constantly on the alert.

1988 and 1995 saw the passage of laws restricting or banning smoking in many public places. As of last year, Norway's cigarette prices were the highest in the world, with three-quarters of the price as tax. Public awareness, education and advocacy are ensured by a diverse coalition of government, health, medical and sports associations. I salute their efforts.

Today, with the draft legislation that you have helped to advance, Norway is poised, once again, to make tobacco control history.

We know that second-hand smoke kills. It is estimated that in Norway alone, it kills more than 500 people every year. It increases a non-smoker's risk of ischemic heart disease and lung cancer by 25%. It causes bronchitis, pneumonia and other respiratory diseases. It causes middle-ear infections and asthma in children. Fetal exposure to smoke - either the pregnant woman's smoke

or second-hand smoke - reduces the average birth weight of babies, who then face a higher risk of developing medical problems and learning disabilities. Tragically, exposure to second-hand smoke in utero substantially increases the risk of sudden infant death.

Approximately 700 million, or almost half, of the world's children are exposed to second-hand smoke.

Here in Norway, you have worked hard to protect children, pregnant women and other adults - first in public transport, schools, and hospitals - then in restaurants and bars. And now finally, we have the chance to much more fully protect people at work.

Let's face it: most workers are simply not in a position to change their work environment or leave their jobs to protect their health. In most cases, where tobacco free workplaces are not guaranteed, employees are obliged to spend the majority of their waking hours in health-threatening situations. A recent study calculated the amount of chemicals inhaled by a typical restaurant worker during an eight-hour shift. I can tell you, the list is frightening: lead, cadmium, formaldehyde, benzene, chromium, nickel - all known carcinogens. Not to mention carbon monoxide, tar and nicotine. Until now, there was no prospect for change.

It took courage and insight to get this far. We have learned many lessons along the way. Contrary to what some would have us believe, there is no "jobs vs. tobacco" ultimatum. Rather than endangering jobs and economies, effective, comprehensive tobacco control only improves economic prospects by saving lives, protecting the health of citizens, and creating a healthier, more productive population. Leaders here in Norway have understood that tobacco free workplaces are not only a fundamental right of employees - but that they also translate into lower absenteeism, lower health costs and a more productive work force.