

Hookah parlours smoker's haven

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

Mumbai: Researchers from the HEM, which is located in the BMC-run Kasturba Hospital at Chinchpokli, have reported a drastic fall in pollution levels in pubs, cafes and restaurants following the smoking ban. Their findings come at a time when the city is ready to host the 14th World Conference on 'Tobacco or Health', which will be inaugurated on Sunday.

India's ban makes it illegal to smoke in any public place, including offices, restaurants, bars, auditoriums, railway stations and bus stops and excluding roads and public parks.

"When we tested the levels of fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) in the restaurants and bars in September 2008, it stood at an overall average of 669.95 ug/m³ (microgram per cubic metre). This average dropped to 240.8 ug/m³ when the same establishments were tested after the ban in December-January" said chest physician Rohini Chowgule of HEM. The National Ambient Air Quality Standard has been set at 35 ug/m³.

Chowgule added that fine pollutants directly enter the lungs, causing respiratory problems besides increasing the risk of heart problems.

Explaining why there was still pollution in the air after the smoking ban, Aditi Deshpande, who co-authored the research, said, "This is be-

cause air-conditioning systems in our restaurants aren't always monitored, food is cooked in open kitchens and there is a lot of dust."

Interestingly smokers may have found a haven in hookah parlours. The three hookah parlours surveyed showed a dramatic increase in PM 2.5 after the ban. Indoor air monitored at parlours in Bandra and Mulund showed that the PM 2.5 levels there had skyrocketed from 965.7 ug/m³ (pre-ban) to 1,498 ug/m³ (post-ban). "We found that cigarette smoking was going on in hookah parlours despite the ban," said Deshpande, explaining that the lack of proper ventilation and glass enclosures heightened the effect.

Anti-tobacco activists welcomed the drop in pollution levels. Dr P C Gupta of the Heals Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, a voluntary organization, said the findings were what they had anticipated. "A recent survey of ours showed that a majority of Mumbaikars supported the ban on smoking in public places."

He said the drop signalled a relief for non-smokers who were otherwise exposed to secondhand or passive smoking. Secondhand smoke contains over 4,000 toxic chemicals.

Interestingly, the five smoke-free venues (control sites) surveyed had air quality worse than the 35 ug/m³ standard. Before the ban they showed 47 ug/m³ and after the ban 85.2 ug/m³.