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Voices of the Victims: a wake-up call for smokers

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"SEVENTEEN years ago, I lost my voice due to constant smoking for 25-30 years," says Deepak Kumar, a throat cancer survivor, at a talk held at the Tata Memorial Hospital. The talk, Voices of the Victims, invited a number of patients diagnosed with tobacco-related cancer to speak about harmful effects of tobacco products on the eve of World Anti-Tobacco Day.

"It is not an informed choice," Kumar says, responding to a question on the responsibility of smokers in maintaining health. People often do not realise that products like gutka can be harmful and due to misleading advertisements they consider these products to be harmless mouth fresheners. The problem, according to Dr Rajendra Kerkar, is that once a person becomes addicted to tobacco, breaking the habit is difficult.

Kerkar, a cancer specialist at the Tata Memorial Hospital, has been a smoker for years. He knows the risks as he has already been operated upon for tongue cancer. Yet

he cannot quit, as the addiction is too strong.

Because of these kind of reasons, it's tough to convince people through anti-tobacco campaigns. This can be achieved only by implementing laws like anti-smoking law.

Second-hand smoking should also be prevented to protect non-smokers from the harms of nicotine. However, many of the victims of tobacco abuse believe that a harder stance must be taken, and that like other harmful substances such as opium, tobacco also should be banned. The problem, they say, is that the government treats tobacco "as a source of revenue," a practice which must stop, if the anti-tobacco movement is to have any chance of success.

The victims believe that it is their mission to educate others about the ills of tobacco, and to ensure that no one else goes through what they have.

On May 31, legislation comes into force mandating that all tobacco products display pictorial warnings showing the harms caused by tobacco—a victory for those who, like Kumar, fight against tobacco.