

The
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Smoking in Latin America Stubbed out

A bastion of tobacco addiction introduces a ban

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TOBACCO, as generations of



Not so liberating for health care

schoolchildren have been taught, was brought to Europe from the Americas along with potatoes and piles of gold. Latin America remains addicted to the stuff. But the region has now begun to try to kick the habit. This month Chile became the 14th Latin American country to ban smoking in enclosed public spaces.

Chile's conversion is significant, since it is something of a smokers' corner. The World Health Organisation says over 40% of Chileans smoke, compared with 27% of Argentines and 17% of people in Brazil, where curbs on smoking began in the late 1990s. Chile's health minister,

Jaime Mañalich, says that treating tobacco victims takes a quarter of the \$10 billion public health-care budget.

Chile's smokers are getting younger. According to the Tobacco Atlas, a study of the industry, nearly 40% of girls aged 13-15 in Santiago, Chile's capital, smoke cigarettes. That is up from just 20% in 2003, and is the highest rate in the world. Growing prosperity is partly to blame. Mr Mañalich also points to a cultural change: "Chile has always been a very macho country but that is changing. For women, smoking in public is somehow a sign they are liberated."

Latin America's new curbs on smoking face resistance from the industry. Philip Morris International, an American tobacco company, has filed a claim against Uruguay at the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, an arm of the World Bank, claiming that the country's anti-smoking measures violate a bilateral investment treaty. Brazil, the world's third-biggest producer of tobacco leaf, faces pressure from its planters to protect their jobs.

The anti-smoking lobby wants to see pricing and taxing of cigarettes be co-ordinated across Latin America, to discourage contraband. With income varying widely among countries, that would be hard. But governments could discourage smoking with other steps, such as curbs on advertising, bigger health warnings and subsidising nicotine-replacement therapy.

"Only Satan can grant man the faculty of expelling smoke through the mouth," declared the Spanish Inquisition in imprisoning Rodrigo de Jerez, one of Columbus's sailors, and the first person to bring tobacco to Europe. Latin American governments now seem to agree.

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