

Indian social activist wins International award on tobacco control

Social Activist Hemant Goswami has been selected for the prestigious international award called, the 'Global Smokefree Partnership Award.' The honour is awarded by 'The Global Smokefree Partnership,' a joint initiative of over twenty international organisations formed to promote effective smokefree air policies worldwide.

The international award given by the international coalition is coordinated by 'American Cancer Society' and includes reputed international organisations like; Cancer Research - UK, Global Tobacco Research Network, International Union Against Cancer, International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, Johnson and Johnson, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Institute for Global Tobacco Control, Action on Smoking and Health - London, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Pfizer, Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance, World Heart Federation and others.

Hemant Goswami has been awarded the Extraordinary Award for his exceptional and outstanding commitment as a dedicated smoke-free and tobacco control activist to promote the implementation of the guidelines on Article 8 (smoke-free policies) of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Hemant Goswami is credited with initiating the smoke-free movement in India and for making Chandigarh as the first smoke-free city not only in India but also the first one even in any third world country. A feat which everyone thought would be impossible to achieve in India.

Four awardees were selected from across the world for the 2008 awards. Besides Goswami, the other three who have been selected for the awards are; the Government of Panama, Inter-American Heart Foundation of Mexico and Thailand's Minister of Health. The previous year's recipient of the award includes; President of Uruguay, Mr. Tabaré Vázquez; The Roswell Park Cancer Institute and The World Health Organization's Tobacco Free Initiative.

Goswami shall be presented the award at the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) conference in Bangkok, Thailand on Wednesday, October 29th 2008.

ABOUT SMOKE-FREE CHANDIGARH INITIATIVE

It took more than four years of sustained advocacy and efforts by Hemant Goswami, chairperson of Burning Brain Society to achieve the smoke-free status for Chandigarh. Right from building a momentum for tobacco control, to preparing a road map, and getting it executed was done through an aggressive and altogether a new form of activist approach. As an innovation, Hemant used the provisions of 'Right to Information Act to make the non-responsive government machinery answerable.

More than 300 'Right to Information (RTI)' petitions were filed by him over a period of one year. The RTI petitions sought detailed information from each government department on the implementation and enforcement of various provisions of tobacco control laws and in case they were not implemented, the name of the person responsible for neglecting his/her duty. In all there were more than eighteen related information requests/questions in the petition. This innovative approach was clubbed with other routine advocacy activities and a media strategy too. Within a year more than 1800 warning boards, as mandated under the tobacco control legislation were displayed in all government offices. Each and every educational institute too started complying with the law and

Chandigarh became the first place anywhere in the world where all the educational institutes became hundred percent smoke-free.

Once the initial compliance started and the momentum got built, Hemant started lobbying and selling the idea of smoke-free city to the administration. After sustained effort, the success came in. Chandigarh Police agreed to initiate the enforcement drive and requested Burning Brain Society to sensitize and train the policemen on the provisions of law. This was done immediately and from April 2007, a sustained enforcement drive was initiated by the police.

A comprehensive strategy helped to increase the compliance rate very fast. Within a month the compliance of the 2005 Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products Act reached over 70 percent. This gave confidence to the administration that the 'Smoke-Free City' initiative proposed by Hemant was feasible. A series of meetings followed in which actions to be taken and strategies to be followed to have a sustainable and successful 'Smoke-Free Chandigarh' initiative were decided. A series of notifications and government orders were promulgated. Finally on July 15, 2007, Chandigarh was declared a smoke-free city.

The entire campaign had to work without any extraneous help from any agency. Hemant reveals that, 'Smoke-Free Chandigarh' was not a part of any government or any funding agencies project and not a single paisa was received for the initiative. The whole initiative was carried out independently. Smoke-Free Chandigarh completed a successful one year on July 15, 2008. The project has been sustained for the first year without any support of the Union Government. Currently Hemant and his team are still fighting a lethargic and corrupt government machinery to further keep going the efforts. They are filing hundreds of individual complaints and many court cases not only to sustain the effort but also to stretch the smoke-free initiative limits to new levels.

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