

'Germany should raise smoking age to 21'

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Berlin Christian Democrat (CDU) politician Cornelia Seibeld told regional newspaper the BZ this week that Germany should follow New York's lead and increase the minimum smoking age from 18 to 21.

"We need to curb nicotine addiction among young people" said Seibeld, citing figures showing that it was more common for German youngsters to be addicted to cigarettes than alcohol.

Raising the legal smoking age could help put a cap on this, as by the time they reach 21 people are "more aware of the health consequences of their behaviour," she told the BZ.

Spatz agreed, and told The Local that Germany should indeed "look to New York for a positive role model" for dissuading young smokers. "If a person starts under the age of 21 they are more likely to become addicted," he said, echoing Seibeld's argument.

The anti-smoking campaigner admitted that he knew that Germany was still a long way from stubbing out its love affair with tobacco. "The tobacco business has a stronghold in Germany as it's an industry-friendly country," he said.

And as one of the world's leading exporters of cigarettes, Germany should first change what he described as the "cuddling up between the government and tobacco companies." As it stands, the two are too close for change to be feasible, Spatz believes.

Yet even though Germany is still considered relatively smoke-tolerant within Europe, the past decade has seen the beginnings of change, with a ban on smoking in the workplace introduced in 2007 - which included most bars and restaurants.

Since then the country has seen 10 percent drop in strokes and heart attacks, according to research from the German Cancer Research Centre. But the ban is being implemented patchily, with different federal states imposing different rules, and many bars banning under-18s and declaring themselves havens for smokers.

"Go in a bar or disco, and it's horrible," said Spatz.

The 2007 reform also raised the legal smoking age to 18 and since then the number of young smokers has, Spatz said, continued to drop. Banning smoking on school grounds also saw numbers pushed down and "There are studies which show clearly that it is no longer cool," he suggested.

“The number of young people smoking has dropped by 28 percent since 2001, basically because they can't” he said, adding that “over the past ten years the number of cigarettes being made per year has dropped from 150 billion to 80 billion.”

But the fact that Germany is one of only two countries in the EU – the other being Bulgaria – that still allows tobacco companies to advertise, is a problem that needs to be addressed alongside trying to push up the legal limit.

This “grouped measures” approach – both banning advertising and introducing a 21 age-limit – could be the key to de-normalising smoking, something that Spatz suggested “could change under the new coalition,” he said.

As for fears that more teenagers would smoke illegally - and buy counterfeit cigarettes from smugglers if they were banned from buying their smokes in the shops , Spatz dismissed the idea.

“This is a standard argument from tobacco companies,” he said. “There has been very little increase in illegal cigarette trade since the age limit was raised in 2007.”

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