

Obfrau Dr. Brigitte Povich
Health Committee of the Parliament
Dr. Karl Renner-Ring 3
1017 Vienna
Austria

8 January 2019

Tobacco: no more “Spanish model” in Spain, no more elsewhere

Dear Obfrau of the Health Committee Dr. Brigitte Povich,

Dear Parliamentarians of the Republic of Austria,

This week you will give attention to the very successful “Don’t Smoke” referendum in the health-committee of your parliament. We, Public Health experts from Spain, wonder why Austria still uses our old “Spanish model”. The Spanish model means separating restaurants or bars into smoking and non-smoking areas. When in 2005 the Congress in Spain passed the smoking prevention act that banned the use of tobacco in workplaces and enclosed public places and all its advertising, the resistance was so fierce that most hospitality settings were exempted from it. Soon afterwards, the tobacco control coalition acted to remove this exemption, and this was finally achieved in 2010. And we would never go back! Why did Austria copy our failing experiment? And more importantly, why do you keep it? Non-smoker protection was and is not possible with the old Spanish Model.

The former President of Spain, Mr. Rodriguez Zapatero, agreed on the proposal of the Ministry of Health to adopt a comprehensive regulation of tobacco in Spain. He was sure that this new law could contribute to population health gains and to the sustainability of the National Health System. Moreover, he understood that comprehensive laws were a sign of progress and had already been adopted by some of the most advanced countries in the world. It was no easy to take this decision, because several Ministers were reluctant, mainly because the new law could be interpreted as a threat to freedom and as prohibitionist (an argument which mirrored the financial objectives of the tobacco industry).

The “old Spanish model”, which separated smoking and non-smoking areas in the hospitality sector was supported by the tobacco industry to challenge smoking bans in other countries. The problem was that this partial restriction became more and more the rule and contradicted the aim to protect non-smokers. It was quite hard to find smoke-free bars and restaurants, only restaurants with over 100m² had non-smoking areas. Some hosts divided their bars and restaurants and subscribed the divided parts as separated restaurants, only to offer completely smoking restaurants. Fortunately, Spain recognised that it did not work and adopted fully smoke-free restaurants and bars instead. The hospitality-industry is still flourishing – doing

better than the economy as a whole in these troubled times. Everybody is happy and smoking is decreasing overall and particularly among young people. We would never go back to that experiment called the “Spanish model”! As any sensible public health policy, tobacco regulation is based in respect for human rights, especially those of hospitality workers and children. Nobody should be exposed to this deadly carcinogen against his will.

We wonder why Austria still uses our insufficient old model. It could not be a question of evidence, there is no doubt of the beneficial effects of a comprehensive smoking ban, scientific proofs are overwhelming. There is no sound argument in favour of this situation. Of course there are powerful interest groups that oppose science, it is always like this. But decision makers have the duty of prevent human suffering. When we were preparing the legislative change in Spain, the Minister invited doctors to her press conferences. Journalists were confronted with facts: women in their late forties and fifties with lung cancer close to death and leaving orphan children, men that could not enjoy late life because of heart attacks or chronic respiratory disease, children with asthma who were frequently admitted to hospitals, etc. Is there anyone who can look in the eyes of hospitality workers or children and tell them that they will remain deprived from health protection?

When we succeeded in Spain with the new law, the feelings of the public health community were that despite of having much fewer resources than the tobacco industry, we won; and we won because we were right. We are sure that Austrian people will win, because they are right, the success is ineluctable, and we hope it will be soon as the stakes are high.

Ildefonso Hernández-Aguado. Professor of Public Health. Director General of Public Health of the Spanish Government 2008-2011 (coordinated the new tobacco prevention law).

Joan R Villalbí. President of the Spanish Association of Public Health and Health Administration and former President of the Spanish Committee for Tobacco Prevention.