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### Smoking divisive in the workplace

There are not many people now who would really want to put the clock back.

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If the UAE's sweeping new laws about smoking in public arouse anything like as much controversy as ours did in the UK, you're going to be in for a long debate, with smokers complaining about state bureaucracy and anti-smokers claiming to uphold national standards of health.

But from the British vantage point, having seen the success of the anti-smoking campaign over several decades, let me assure you of one thing: There are not many people now who would really want to put the clock back.

The steady reduction in smoking has benefited the public to a degree unimaginable when the link with lung cancer was first proved, fifty years ago.

One close colleague of mine, a non-smoker, was in the Army in a regiment where 90 per cent were smokers.

When he attended his first reunion, after a 30-year interval, he was astonished to find how many of those men had died prematurely from cancer, strokes or heart disease, and was in no doubt whatsoever that smoking was the biggest factor.

As always, with important news in the UAE, I like to take the national pulse by checking various media for what the readers' comments reveal. For such an emotive topic, I was impressed with the quality of debate.

Not surprisingly, many of the contributors were lifelong heavy smokers, yet only about a quarter of these were against the new laws. The rest were either still hoping to give up, or wished they'd never started.

#### Question of ethics

The ethical issue was investigated in depth — the extent to which smokers were being subsidised by non-smokers.

This directly echoed the big debate when our own smoking laws began to impact on the workplace, often involving myself as counsellor or mediator.

On the small scale, this showed up in complaints about smokers being entitled to their smoke breaks, leaving non-smokers to handle their work for them. On the larger issue, non-smokers realised they were subsidising a lot more than this — the national cost of hospital treatment, surgery attendance, special drugs etc, all underwritten by various forms of insurance, ultimately paid for by all of us. Plus, thousands of lost hours and days due to smoking-related illnesses.

## Rights

This comment seemed to me especially telling: "Smoking is a privilege, not a right. But it is my right to breathe air that isn't polluted by cigarettes."

Another queried the freedom to indulge a harmful habit, if it doesn't harm other people. When the habit is addictive, that freedom is surely questionable.

Yesterday I thought for a moment I was back in Dubai, but I was just passing through a busy quarter of central London that appears predominately Islamic, at least judging by the number of halal shops.

During the winter weather and snow of last week, there were small groups smoking their finely decorated shisha pipes in the traditional style. But being forbidden to smoke indoors, they were having to sit outside on the forecourt, where the management had erected a row of large outdoor, overhead heaters.

Well, this arrangement could be coming your way too. But of course, it will be the other way around.

Someone in the UAE is going to make a fortune by being the first to supply cafes with powerful overhead air-conditioning units, to beat the searing heat of the Gulf.

## Key points: Sensitive issue

- The UAE has passed strict new laws about smoking in public places
- In the UK, anti-smoking laws have greatly improved public health
- There will be fierce debates about privileges, rights and responsibilities

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