

17 May 2021

To the WHO Expert Committee on the Selection and Use of Essential Medicines:

On behalf of Vital Strategies, a partner in the global fight against tobacco, I write in the strongest possible support of placing bupropion and varenicline on the Essential Medicines List. These medications are the most effective means of smoking cessation, which is a crucial component of the MPOWER strategy for reducing harms from tobacco that has been endorsed and adopted by the World Health Organization.

Tobacco use is perhaps the leading preventable cause of death in the world, linked to 8 million deaths annually from conditions such as ischemic heart disease, stroke, emphysema, lung cancer and esophageal cancer. Most smokers know that smoking is injurious to their health, and most will make multiple attempts to quit over their lifetime. Nicotine is a powerfully addictive chemical, and nicotine addiction is what keeps people smoking.

The most recent WHO Report of the Global Tobacco Epidemic states that “Tobacco cessation and tobacco dependence treatment strategies should be based on the best available evidence of effectiveness.” A large body of scientific evidence has established that bupropion and varenicline are more effective as aids in smoking cessation than abstinence alone or the provision of nicotine replacement therapy. The safety profiles of bupropion and varenicline are well-established. The 2019 WHO report acknowledged this, and stated “Efficacy of pharmacotherapies is generally high, and compared to people who do not use an intervention, absolute quit rate increases can range from 6% for a single type of NRT to almost 15% for varenicline...Both behavioral cessation support and pharmacotherapies are effective in helping people to quit tobacco use. Combining both behavioral and pharmacotherapy interventions, however, is more effective and can double the chances of successfully quitting.”

Only 32% of the world’s population are covered by smoking cessation programs, and without including bupropion and varenicline on the essential medicines list, access to the most effective means of smoking cessation is limited even in places where cessation programs are available.

We strongly urge addition of both bupropion and varenicline to the Essential Medicines List.

Sincerely,



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