

Tobacco is the second major cause of death in the world. Five million people die each year due to tobacco-related illnesses. Half the people who smoke today, 650 million, will die from tobacco use.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that nicotine is an addictive drug that provokes dependence. Only a small percentage of smokers, 0.5%–5% each year in the European Region, achieve long-term abstinence without help or support. Even in countries where tobacco control policies are instituted and where the health risks of tobacco use are commonly understood, smoking prevalence rates have not decreased.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, the WHO Regional Office for Europe issued *The WHO European Strategy for Smoking Cessation Policy*, which states that increasing tobacco cessation in adults and reducing the number of young people who start smoking is critically important to improving public health.<sup>3</sup> Studies have proven that quitting smoking at any age has immediate as well as long-term benefits, reducing a person's risk of dying from a smoking-related disease or illness and improving overall health.<sup>4</sup>

### TOBACCO DEPENDENCE IN EUROPE

The European Region of WHO, with only 15% of the world's population, faces nearly one third of the worldwide burden of tobacco-related diseases. In 2000, 1.6 million deaths in the European Region were attributed to tobacco.<sup>5</sup> While smoking prevalence has fallen from 45% to 30% over the past 30 years, current rates show no further reduction. The current average annual reduction of smoking prevalence is only 1%. Most notably, smoking prevalence rates have risen among young people, women and lower socioeconomic groups.<sup>6</sup>

According to the WHO, the following statistics further support smoking and nicotine addiction as a serious health problem:

- Smoking prevalence in the European Region is 38% for men and 24% for women.
- Prevalence among 15-18 year olds is approximately 30%, with no decrease in Western Europe and a slight increase in Eastern Europe.
- People from lower socioeconomic groups still smoke significantly more than the average adult population, and there is no sign of this difference being reduced.
- Each day, nearly 3,400 people in the European Region die from tobacco-related causes.
- Unless more effective measures are implemented, tobacco products will cause 2 million deaths, or 20% of all deaths, each year by 2020.<sup>7</sup>

By reducing the global cigarette consumption per adult in half by 2020, approximately one third of tobacco-related deaths would be avoided in that year, which would almost halve the tobacco-related deaths in the second quarter of the century.<sup>8</sup> These changes could prevent between 7 and 10 million tobacco-related deaths by 2025 in the European Region.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 World Health Organization. Tobacco Free Initiative: Why is tobacco a public health priority?. Available from <http://www.who.int/tobacco/about/en/> Accessed on October 12, 2004.
- 2 World Health Organization. WHO European Strategy for Smoking Cessation Policy. WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003.
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- 4 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Health Consequences of Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2004.
- 5 World Health Organization. WHO European Strategy for Smoking Cessation Policy. WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003.
- 6 World Health Organization. European Strategy for Tobacco Control. WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2002.
- 7 World Health Organization. Tobacco control in the WHO European Region: current status and developments. (Fact Sheet 06/02), September 17, 2002.
- 8 World Health Organization. WHO European Strategy for Smoking Cessation Policy. WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003.
- 9 World Health Organization. WHO European Strategy for Smoking Cessation Policy. WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

**Keri P. Mattox**

Investor Relations and Corporate Communications

**Nabi Biopharmaceuticals**

5800 Park of Commerce Blvd N.W., Boca Raton, FL 33487

T: 800.635.1766 P: 561.989.5815 E: [irpr@nabi.com](mailto:irpr@nabi.com) [www.nabi.com](http://www.nabi.com)