Smoking is rarely out of the news these days especially with the ratification of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) effective as of this February. In the wake of the measures many countries are bringing in their own anti-smoking legislation.

It remains to be seen as to whether or not Italy will be consistent in the matter of smoking control. The difficulty arises through the celebration of the festival of St. Anthony, and with one town in particular, Capena (a small medieval town north of Rome). Every year when they have their feast-day bonfire the burning bundles of sticks are used to light cigarettes. Inhabitants of all ages are encouraged to smoke, in a tradition that goes back to the smoking of rosemary, but with the modern times replacing the herb with tobacco. The option of sweets for the children this year failed to make impact (and those who chose sweets had sweet cigarettes).

The FCTC was introduced to reduce the 5 million deaths from smoking that occurs each year, a figure that is estimated to rise to 10 million by the year 2030. Seventy per cent of the deaths occur in developing countries and partly as a result of tobacco manufacturers seeking less regulated outlets for their lethal product.

Glasgow National Health System properties may soon be tobacco-free in spite of the fact that designated smoking shelters were erected fairly recently in the grounds of many of the city's hospitals. The administrators of Northern Ireland have issued a consultation paper with the intention of implementing a smoking ban in all public places. Around 13,000 responses, most in favor of a ban, have been received so far. The closing date for comment is just before the end of March.

Public opinion has fuelled the above anti-smoking measures. If the matter had been left to the politicians we would still be in the realm of voluntary agreements in the hands of the tobacco company lobbyists and have made little progress. With a general election expected it might be good to ask prospective MPs where they stand on this and other health issues.

UK Health secretary Dr. John Reid believes that the best way to control smoking is to get people to adopt healthier lifestyles by improving their social circumstances. 'If you want people to choose a healthy lifestyle, if you want people to give up smoking, then you make them middle class,' he says. Let us help people to find better reasons for making their choices, with a nudge in the right direction by the law!