His Excellency
Benigno Simeon C. Aquino III
President, Republic of the Philippines
Malacañan Palace
Manila, Philippines
Email: op@president.gov.ph

8 June 2014

Dear President Aquino,

On behalf of the global, regional and national communities of health professionals working to improve cardiovascular health, we write to urge the Filipino government to comply with guidelines on graphic warnings on tobacco products as defined under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), and to ensure that the tobacco industry has no influence on government positions or policies that influence health.

In the Philippines, cardiovascular disease (primarily heart attack and stroke) kills 30% of the population. The average citizen has more reason to fear heart disease than to fear crime, terrorism, or natural disaster (or the combination of all three). The same is true around Asia, and globally. Death and disability from CVD are not limited to the aged, but, especially in low- and middle-income countries, affect many who are in the prime of their economic productivity. Consequently, heart disease is a threat to both the health and the prosperity of individuals, families, communities and the country as a whole.

As health professionals who are aware of the enormous cost of death and disability caused by CVD, and aligned with global goals articulated in the WHO Global Action Plan on the Prevention and Control of NCDs, we work together to reduce premature mortality from CVD by 25% by 2025.

Tobacco accounts for a significant proportion of premature mortality from heart disease. Implementation of the FCTC is among the most cost-effective ways that governments can protect their populations from CVD. Graphic health warnings on tobacco products are one example: they prevent youth from starting to smoke and help smokers quit or reduce consumption. To be most effective and to meet international standards, graphic warnings must cover at least the top 50% of cigarette packs and be implemented by the appropriate health agency such as the Department of Health (DOH) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

There is an inherent contradiction between the interests of the tobacco industry and the interests of public health and the prosperity that it generates. This contradiction has been recognized not only by all States Parties of the FCTC, but also by all WHO Member States who have, on several occasions, acknowledged the need to protect health policy from the influence of the tobacco industry. This contradiction makes it impossible to balance the interests of the tobacco industry with those of the citizenry, and forces governments to choose between defending the health and prosperity of their constituents, or betraying it.

The Inter-Agency Committee on Tobacco (IACT) created under the Tobacco Regulation Act of 2003 (RA 9211) includes the tobacco industry in its membership. Not surprisingly, the presence of the tobacco industry limits the committee’s ability to protect the interests of its people.
Mr. President, you have made tremendous gains with the Sin Tax Reform Act of 2012. In addition, the Joint Memorandum Circular (JMC) 2010-01 of the Civil Service Commission and Department of Health protects your bureaucracy from the tobacco industry’s powerful interests and its pernicious tactics. The JMC serves as a best practice model for other countries, and the Philippines has been hailed for such policies that uphold Article 5.3 of the FCTC against the industry’s tactics.

We urge you to support for effective legislation requiring large warnings (>50%), printed on top of the pack, to be implemented by the DOH and FDA, and to eliminate tobacco industry influence in public health policies.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Johanna Ralston, CEO
World Heart Federation

K. H. Sim, MD, President
Asian Pacific Society of Cardiology

Eugenio B. Reyes, MD, President
Philippine Heart Association

cc:
Hon. Franklin M. Drilon, President of the Senate
Hon. Feliciano R. Belmonte, Jr., Speaker of the House of Representatives
Hon. Teofisto L. Guingona III, Chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Demography
Hon. Pia S. Cayetano, Chair of the Senate Committees on Education, Arts, and Culture and on Women, Family Relations, and Gender Equality
Hon. Paolo Benigno Aquino IV, Chair of the Senate Committee on Youth
Hon. Grace L. Poe, Chair of the Senate Committee on Public Information and Mass Media
Hon. Eufranio C. Eriguel, Chair of the House Committee on Health
Hon. Enrique T. Ona, Secretary of Health

1The World Health Assembly, which includes all WHO Member States (even those not party to the FCTC), has on several occasions acknowledged this contradiction and the consequent need to protect policy that has an impact on health from influences of the tobacco industry, most recently in its endorsement of the Political Declaration of the UN High-level meeting on NCDs and the WHO Global Action Plan on NCDs.