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Tobacco is a huge problem in Colombia. Unfortunately, our youth are smoking more and more, and there is now more nicotine in cigarettes.

I'm an ex-smoker myself – I used to smoke two packs a day – and decided to quit 20 years ago for the sake of my heart. It was a very hard challenge! In my role as President of the Colombian Society of Cardiology, I worked on initiatives aimed at promoting and disseminating information on smoking and cardiovascular risk for the Colombian population jointly with the Colombian Health Ministry and other health organizations.

Our campaign with the Ministry of Health aims to teach doctors how to better get the message across to their patients, at the same time helping the patient take responsibility for their own health looking for empowerment of the primary care physicians about a “self-caring culture” directed to smokers.

To me, this partnership between the doctor and patient is crucial. We want everyone to enjoy their old age in a healthy way, free of tobacco and smoke, and understanding the risks of smoking and changing mindsets, with the support of their doctor and the media. It's a big step in the right direction.

General practitioners are key. They are usually the first clinicians to see the patient, and should therefore be the ones that ask for the necessary tests and medications – this is currently seen as an unnecessary expense. Thankfully, the law is changing, and we can begin to recover dignity and regain autonomy for prevention and prescription.

Doctors in Colombia are exceptionally well trained and more than capable of making the right decisions – which is why the new law is very welcome, giving them the opportunity to use their own professional judgement.

For the patient, it's about taking responsibility for their health. Most people know their height, weight and shoe size, for example, but not the important things like their cholesterol levels or blood pressure. If it doesn't hurt they don't do any check-ups – for example, 25% of adults are hypertensive and don't even know it.

We are also working to raise awareness amongst adolescents about what impacts their health. Too often young people think they are invincible, but they are the ones most exposed to risk, and during a long time. We want to educate teachers about the harmful effects of tobacco, so that in turn they can educate their students.

Currently I am helping with a guide on cardiovascular risks for patients with the Colombian Society of Cardiology and the Colombian Heart Foundation and one important part of it is related to tobacco abuse.

