

From correspondents in Geneva

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THE World Health Organisation said it will no longer recruit smokers under a tough new employment policy introduced to protect its credibility as the UN's health agency.

The policy was announced to job seekers today on the WHO's website.

New vacancy notices now carry a stark warning to candidates for any posts worldwide "WHO has a smoke free environment and does not recruit smokers or other tobacco users".

Application forms ask candidates if they smoke and if they would continue to do so if they were employed by the WHO.

Spokesman Iain Simpson said anyone who answers "yes" to both questions will not be invited to an interview.

The agency believes its credibility in promoting the principle of a tobacco free environment is at stake.

"The WHO is campaigning against tobacco and the tobacco industry, and has led efforts to adopt the international anti-tobacco treaty. For us, it's a question of principle," Mr Simpson said.

The WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which came into force this year, bans the promotion and advertising of tobacco products including cigarettes, as well as sales to minors.

It also advocates public smoking restrictions and larger health warnings on cigarette packs, and promotes taxation as a way to cut consumption and fight smuggling.

Some 100 countries have ratified the treaty.

The new policy will not apply to existing WHO employees, but they are being encouraged to quit.

The agency said its medical services provided individual counselling and prescriptions for nicotine replacement therapy such as patches and gum which were reimbursed at 80 per cent by staff health insurance.

However, the new policy would apply if an employee leaves the agency and later returns to work. A growing proportion of WHO staff are recruited on short term contracts.

The UN body said it would only take disciplinary action against a serving staff member who smokes if they break a ban on tobacco use on its premises.

Clusters of people can be regularly seen smoking outside entrances at WHO headquarters in Geneva, although some of the agency's offices also ban smoking on "outside premises".

Mr Simpson said the recruitment ban on tobacco users had been checked with lawyers and was not discriminatory.

A leading Swiss anti-smoking campaigner, Jean Charles Rielle, said he felt ill at ease with the move and opposed it as a matter of principle.

"As a doctor, I cannot accept that a person suffering from a dependency, whatever it is, should be excluded if they are able to carry out the objectives set by the company," Mr Rielle told the Swiss newspaper Le Temps.

WHO Director General Lee Jong Wook has urged doctors and other medical professionals to stop smoking, saying they should be role models in the battle to curb tobacco-related deaths and illnesses.

Tobacco-related disease claims one life every six and a half seconds, and the annual death toll is expected to double to 10 million by 2020, with most of the victims in developing countries, according to WHO figures.