Sheryl Dennis Wright, an alumnus of the McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer (the Knowledge Hub on Legal Challenges)'s International Legal Training Program, is helping build a healthier Jamaica by advancing tobacco control policy.

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It may be fate that led Sheryl Dennis Wright to a career in health law and policy. But it's Sheryl's passion, drive, and collaborative spirit that led her to use law and policy to improve public health for Jamaicans.

Sheryl is a Legal Officer in Jamaica's Ministry of Health of Wellness. She has spent the past decade helping strengthen policies and regulations to protect Jamaicans from the harmful effects of tobacco, and most recently provided technical support to develop the country's 2020 comprehensive tobacco control bill.

But law and policy were not part of Sheryl's plans. She was happily working in telecommunications after earning a degree in history and international relations when she received a letter saying she was accepted to law school. She couldn’t even remember applying but decided to give it a try, since practising law was one of her childhood aspirations.
“I think maybe law found me,” she says of this unexpected turn.

The stars aligned again in 2010, just months after Sheryl completed law school. She was called to an interview with the Ministry of Health and Wellness, even though she never applied to work in health. She had only filled out a general application to work in government months earlier.

“Again, it would seem that fate caught up to me,” she says.

Early days in tobacco control

With fate's job done, Sheryl's drive took over. She dove head-first into her new role and found a passion for using law to keep people healthy.

Around 2011, she was assigned to work on legal matters related to the ministry's tobacco control portfolio. At the time, Jamaica's efforts to implement the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) were not gaining the desired traction. So, Sheryl set out to learn everything she could about tobacco control policy. She took advantage of opportunities to meet with high-level officials in Jamaica and in other FCTC countries, and to attend regional consultations and FCTC Conference of the Parties (CoP) meetings.

Her work in those early years was integral to the promulgation of Jamaica's 2013 tobacco control regulations, which included – among other things – provisions on graphic health warnings for tobacco products.

But there was still a long way to go, and Sheryl knew that Jamaica needed comprehensive legislation to meet its FCTC obligations. Several challenges stood in the way, though. The tobacco industry was threatening to challenge what it called “onerous” regulations, and robust public education was needed to sensitise the community to further tobacco control measures.

Building capacity and working collaboratively

It was around this time that Sheryl reached out to the FCTC Knowledge Hub on Legal Challenges (McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer) for support with her tobacco control work. After some initial discussions, she attended the McCabe 2015 intensive legal training course in Melbourne.

“The course put me in a strong position to provide support and advice to the Ministry,” she says. “It taught me about what happens in other countries and helped me share strategies to develop policies.”

Sheryl also left her mark on the McCabe Centre, becoming one of the most active and engaged members of our growing network of more than 200 alumni from 70 countries. She has since attended several McCabe Centre events, played a leading role in organising a regional training course in Jamaica, and helped colleagues in the region with their own tobacco control legislation.
In the years after she attended the McCabe Centre course, Sheryl ramped up her pursuit of comprehensive tobacco control legislation in Jamaica. She worked to sensitise several departments of government on tobacco control issues, and reached out to colleagues in different sectors.

“We had to get other ministries to see the need for this legislation, and understand it was not just about health – that it had a lot to do with national development,” she says, noting the importance of multisectoral coordination.

She set up standing meetings to share “the vision” for tobacco control with colleagues in other ministries – including finance, education and youth, foreign affairs and trade, transport, national security and agriculture – as well as civil society groups. She also reached out to police and customs officials to offer support with their enforcement obligations.

“I have been undaunted by the challenges,” Sheryl says. “This process requires a lot of will.”

Along the way, Sheryl continued to collaborate internationally, seeking advice and sharing knowledge with the McCabe Centre, the FCTC Secretariat, and other colleagues in tobacco control.

**The future of tobacco control in Jamaica**

Sheryl’s years of work in tobacco control culminated in December 2020, when Jamaica’s Health Minister tabled a comprehensive tobacco control bill. The proposed legislation goes far beyond the scope of Jamaica’s previous public health laws, adding provisions prohibiting all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, explicitly outlawing tobacco sales to and by minors, and regulating government interactions with the tobacco industry.

Though the bill still needs to pass through committee deliberations and a vote in the legislature, Sheryl says it’s a huge reward to come this far.

“It’s something I feel very proud to be a part of,” she says. “I think it will have a tremendous impact.”

While there is still resistance to tobacco control from industry, and some public figures in Jamaica, Sheryl is determined to keep working to achieve the FCTC mandate.

“This is not personal,” she says. “It is about our children. It is about the kind of Jamaica we want 10 years from now.”

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