

Smoking health catastrophe requires government action

Hamilton Spectator and Straight Goods – March 11, 2002

By Dr. Gordon Guyatt

The most powerful single intervention to improve the health of Canadians may not be a new drug or surgical treatment. Rather, it is more likely to be provincial legislation that could prevent thousands of premature deaths.

In March 1995, Finland put in to effect a new law that banned smoking in all workplaces. Finnish researchers wanted to know the effect of the smoking ban on exposure to tobacco smoke, and on smoking habits. To answer the question, the researchers, led by Antero Heloma of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, studied nine workplaces before the legislation was put in to effect, and again one year after enforcement began. Heloma asked workers about their smoking habits, and measured nicotine levels in the air.

Last autumn, Heloma reported that the number of workers with no exposure to tobacco smoke jumped from 19% to 54%. The ban didn't work completely – 8% of the workers reported more than 4 hours of exposure to tobacco smoke each day. However, that represented a big drop from the 32% who reported over 4 hours a day of smoke exposure before the government enforced its ban.

Were the workers' reports accurate? The huge drops in nicotine levels that Heloma found suggests the answer is yes.

The smoking ban may have had additional impact. The percentage of smokers decreased from 30% to 25%. Therefore, the workplace smoking ban may have helped up to one in six smokers kick the habit (though because of turnover at the workplaces, some of the difference may represent non-smoking workers replacing smokers). In those who continued to smoke, the average daily number of cigarettes dropped from 19 to 16.

The final good news concerns those who managed to quit. Lower income and less educated Canadians have poorer health than the affluent. Higher smoking rates contribute to this difference. That's also true in other

countries. For example, Heloma found that before the smoking ban only 17% of university educated workers smoked. The figure for workers with less education was 35%. But the difference decreased after the ban, because it was the less educated workers who kicked the habit.

Why is the Finnish experience important? Most people know that smoking causes lung cancer, but are less aware that smoking also causes cancer of the mouth, throat, bladder, kidney and stomach. On top of its cancer-inducing effects, smoking triples the risk of dying from heart disease. Shortness of breath from chronic lung disease, which develops in 10% of smokers, make peoples' lives miserable.

The overall impact of smoking on Canadians' health is staggering. On average, smoking reduces your life span by 7 years. Smoking is responsible for one death in 5.

It is also likely that exposure to other peoples' smoke increases risk of both lung cancer and heart disease. This provides the justification for a workplace ban on smoking.

Currently, Canada has a patchwork of city and provincial anti-smoking laws. The Finnish research suggests that legislation banning workplace smoking could have major impact. In Canada, the provinces would have the authority to enact such a law – which, aside from restaurants and bars, Quebec has already done. Ontario should follow suit, and extend the ban to restaurants and bars.

Aside from banning workplace smoking, is there anything else that governments can do to decrease smoking-related deaths? Research has consistently shown that increasing tobacco taxes, and therefore prices, reduces cigarette consumption in both adolescents and adult smokers.

What has the federal government done to reduce smoking-related deaths? They have put full-colour warnings on cigarette packages, and a Canadian Cancer Society survey suggests that they have had an impact. Canadian cigarette taxes remain higher than in United States. Canada's smoking rate is now 23%, the lowest ever.

More recently, former Health Minister Allan Rock introduced legislation to ban cigarette companies from using the words "light" and "mild" to

describe their cigarettes. These labels may give smokers a false sense of safety, and the new law represents a small step forward.

However, NDP leader Alexa McDonough has described the Liberals' approach to the smoking epidemic as both "light" and "mild". She has a point. Further increases in cigarette taxes would make a real impact on consumption. The "light and mild" law is a triumph of show over substance.

Social and economic factors, including poverty, nutrition, and housing, are more important than health care in determining Canadians' health. Smoking is a case in point. Our health care system spends huge amounts on lung cancer surgery, but over 50% of surgically treated patients will have their cancer recur. We spend billions on drugs and surgery for coronary artery disease, but the impact is minor in comparison to the health benefits we could achieve with substantial reductions in smoking.

Serious attempts to address the smoking problem would not be painless. For instance, Hamilton bars and restaurants have objected to the prospect of smoking bans, fearing that smokers will stay away. They may be right.

In focussing on these short-term concerns, however, we are ignoring the long-term benefits of a healthier population. Decreasing smoking-related illness would create a more productive Canadian workforce, and might reduce long-run health care costs. Most important though, is decreasing suffering from illness and premature death. Health research, including the latest study from Finland, shows us how a strong and determined government could reduce that suffering.