

President's Message



David H. Hill, Q.C.
President

Sometimes the Good Guys Don't Win ... or do They?

Lobbyists are again running rampant in the streets of Ottawa! The last few months have seen an intensified lobbying battle over the federal government's blind insistence that a tobacco tax rollback was the only way to solve the cigarette smuggling problem and the associated breakdown of law and order.

It certainly makes one wonder about our country's leadership. I believe that leaders, instead of giving in to terrorism, should stand up to it. There is no question that the tobacco tax rollback is the most disastrous decision that this country has ever seen in the realm of public health. Tens of thousands of Canadians will die prematurely from tobacco-caused diseases directly attributable to this decision of our federal government. There is nothing that justifies a decision that causes such a toll of death. I truly wonder how some of our leaders can look themselves in the mirror each morning.

On the other hand, our country is not totally bereft of courageous leaders. Dr. Ron Stewart, Minister of Health for Nova Scotia, and several Ontario cabinet members including Premier Bob Rae, Treasurer Floyd Laugren and the Health Minister Ruth Grier, all worked with us to fight against this decision.

Was there a viable alternative to the federal government's tobacco tax rollback? The Canadian Cancer Society produced a study that listed 44 measures to reduce the smuggling problem without cutting tobacco taxes. The proposals were well researched, responsible and would not have compromised health. Yes, there were many alternatives to reducing tobacco taxes. The alternatives had the added advantage of not requiring the 70% of Canadians who do not smoke to dig deeper into their pockets to make up the revenue loss from lower tobacco taxes and the increased health costs from the increased incidence of disease. Unfortunately, this time our advocacy did not carry the day. To be fair, it appears the decision had been made months before it was announced.

On the other hand, the federal government decided it had to do something to soften the blow to public health. It allocated significant new funding to tobacco control. It is too early to tell whether it will come close to compensating for the increased consumption of tobacco products that will result from the tobacco tax reduction decision.

The federal Minister of Health, Diane Marleau, has asked the health lobby, including the CCSH, to assist her over the next several months in finding ways to increase tobacco control

measures, including a discussion of plain packaging. Hopefully, such co-operation will enhance the success of our advocacy efforts in the future.

Out of the debate, several provinces publicly announced their support for plain packaging and it appears clear that this is where the political will to implement plain, alternative packaging probably lies. Ontario Health Minister Ruth Grier, following Ontario's reluctant decision to lower its tobacco taxes, has indicated her strong support for plain cigarette packaging. The opportunities for achieving this milestone reform on tobacco control have never been greater.

Another positive side of the losing battle is that once again the Canadian health lobby came together and presented a widely based, unified front in the war on tobacco. The media attention paid to the issue has had an enormous public education effect. Perhaps, as a result, the tide is now turning.

The month of March began with the Supreme Court of Canada refusing the tobacco industry's request to delay using the stronger package warnings. The CCSH was one of several health lobby intervenors in this court case, led by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. In this case, we had a clear win.

We should not expect to win every advocacy battle, even those as just and right as the one over tobacco taxation. But, with every obstacle comes a new opportunity, and the health community is in a position to achieve significant changes in the way tobacco is controlled in Canada. The health community must remain mobilized to ensure that these legislative changes occur, and bring us successfully to a tobacco-free society.

Start Planning Now!

CCSH Annual National Workshop,
September 30, 1994
&
Annual General Meeting,
October 1, 1994

Fredericton, New Brunswick

The Canadian Council on Smoking and Health is already busy planning its 1994 Annual National Workshop which will focus on student advocacy, the theme chosen for National Non-Smoking Week 1995. The CCSH's Annual National Workshop provides an opportunity for those working in tobacco control to meet and attend lectures and workshops on a variety of subjects related to the chosen theme.

For additional information on the Annual National Workshop, or the Annual General Meeting, please contact Shannon Townsend at the CCSH at (613) 567-3050, ext. 301.

