

Smoking to die “a very natural death” in Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia now has province-wide anti smoking legislation, after its legislature introduced a new law that focuses directly on children.

“In public places, wherever there are children and youth present, there will be no smoking,” says Health Minister Jamie Muir.

The law, An Act to Protect Young Persons and Other Persons from Tobacco Smoke, bans smoking in most public places and workplaces, including schools, malls, taxis, theatres and recreational facilities.

It will also be banned in restaurants, bars and bingo halls where youth are present, unless there is an enclosed, well-ventilated area that young people cannot enter. Anyone caught smoking in a banned area faces a fine of up to \$2000.

The new law, which takes effect Jan. 1, 2003, also makes it illegal for anyone under 19 to possess cigarettes. Although young people caught with tobacco will

not be fined, police will now be able to confiscate their cigarettes. “I believe that smoking will die a very natural death,” says Muir. “This is very, very strong legislation.”

However, opposition members claim that it doesn’t go far enough and that more money is needed for anti-smoking programs, and young people claim that they will continue to smoke, law or no law.

And business groups point out — vociferously — that the legislation will hurt small business owners who can’t afford expensive renovations. They also point an accusing finger at the Halifax and Sydney casinos, provincial government cash cows that have been exempted from the legislation.

Still, Canadian Cancer Society spokesperson Steve Machat says the new law is a “viable compromise” that was reached instead of having the province impose an outright ban on smoking in

public places throughout Nova Scotia.

The province has the highest proportion of smokers in the country — 30%. As well, one-quarter of Nova Scotians aged from 15 to 19 years smoke regularly. Muir estimates that tobacco kills 1650 of the province’s smokers each year and costs the health care system \$170 million annually. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

European court rejects woman’s right-to-die appeal

Diane Pretty, a 43-year-old British woman with incurable motor neuron disease, has died from the disease, but only after losing her assisted-suicide case before the European Court of Human Rights. The court ruled in April that the fact assisted suicide is illegal in the UK did not constitute a breach of her rights. She died May 11.

Pretty, who was paralyzed from the neck down, was seeking to end her life with the help of her husband, Brian. They brought their petition to the European court after losing an appeal in Britain (see *CMAJ* 2002;166:232). Following the ruling, Pretty said the law had stripped her of her rights. Her husband launched a Web site, www.justice4diane.org.uk, that included an online petition.

The British Medical Association backed the court ruling, but noted that “it is only right that there should be periodic legal review in light of changing legislation and societal views about human rights.”

Groups opposed to euthanasia expressed satisfaction with the ruling. A spokesperson for the campaign group Alert said that “society should protect [the disabled], not kill them.”

In another case, a 43-year-old paralyzed woman won the right to turn off the ventilator that was keeping her alive. That case, involving a former social worker identified as Ms. B, affirmed a patient’s right to refuse treatment. — *Mary Helen Spooner, West Sussex, UK*

Arsenic poisoning rampant in Bangladesh

Up to half the residents of Bangladesh, some 77 million people, are being exposed to high levels of naturally occurring arsenic in what the World Health Organization (WHO) calls the “largest mass poisoning of a population in history.”

The problem reaches back 30 years, when 9 million narrow, shallow tube wells were dug throughout the country to prevent water-borne diseases caused by contaminated surface water. In 1993 the well water was discovered to contain dangerously high quantities of arsenic from geologic sources. A study involving 10 different districts (*Environ Int* 2002;27:597-604) determined that 94% of urine samples tested contained arsenic above the normal level, as did 95% of nail samples and 96% of hair samples.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer considers arsenic a human carcinogen. Arsenicosis can cause skin cancer and cancers of the bladder, kidney and lung, as well as diseases of the blood vessels and legs and feet, hypertension and reproductive disorders (see *CMAJ* 2002;166[1]:69).

The crisis has led to intense research into water decontamination techniques, which includes development of the STAR (Stevens Technology for Arsenic Removal) water-treatment process. This inexpensive filtration system involves mixing 3.8 g of an iron-sulphate mixture with a small quantity of calcium hypochlorite in drinking water, and then filtering it through sand.

WHO water expert Jamie Bartram says it remains to be seen whether clean water will eliminate any long-term after-effects of arsenicosis. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



The grim reality of arsenicosis