

Canadians suing over cigarette-related fires

Fire-safe cigarettes were invented more than a century ago, but 100 Canadians still die every year in cigarette-related fires. Now, the parents of 3 children who died in such a fire hope to force the government and tobacco manufacturers into action. In January they launched a class-action suit alleging that cigarettes sold by in Canada by Imperial Tobacco Ltd., Rothmans, Benson & Hedges Inc., and JTI-MacDonald Inc. are defective because they fail to provide reasonable protection against house fires.

Jasmine Ragoonanan, 3, Philip Ragoonanan, 16, and Ranuka Baboolal, 15, died in a cigarette-related fire at the Ragoonanan home in Brampton, Ont., Jan. 18, 1998. The parents' lawyer, Douglas Lennox, says they aren't making a "money grab. We know [the tobacco companies] have a gazillion lawyers and could tie this up forever and kids will continue to die. Rather than argue about money, we want a safe product."

They also want the tobacco companies to donate money to the burn centre at Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital.

Cigarette-related fires are the leading cause of fire deaths in Canada, accounting for 25% of the total. In addition to the 100 annual deaths, another 300 people are injured.

Lennox has invited Canadians to join the class-action suit if a family member has died in a smoking-related fire since Oct. 1, 1987, the date research made it blatantly obvious that fire-safety features were available for cigarettes.

The federal government has had the authority to issue fire-safe-tobacco regulations since the 1997 Tobacco Act was



passed. Health Minister Allan Rock told the Canada Safety Council in 1997 that safe-tobacco regulations would be "a priority activity . . . over the next few years."

"The government hasn't done its job," says Lennox, "so the last remedy is private litigation."

The Canadian lawsuit was launched Jan. 11, 2000, the same day that Philip Morris, the largest US cigarette manufacturer, admitted that it knew how to make a safer cigarette and was going to test market the product in Buffalo. New

York State recently approved legislation that requires cigarettes to pass a fire-safety code.

Fire-safe cigarettes either go out quickly when set down or don't generate enough energy to cause a fire. Either way, the safer cigarettes cost the same to manufacture, are no more toxic than other cigarettes and, according to focus group testing, taste the same as conventional cigarettes.

The cigarettes can be manufactured with one or more of the following features: they are thinner, more loosely packed or have less porous paper. Cigarettes are considered fire safe if they will not cause cotton and foam to ignite in more than 90% of tests. The first patent for a fire-safe cigarette was filed in 1889; the US Federal Bureau of Standards developed a fire-safe cigarette in 1929.

Lennox says present-day manufacturers are reluctant to produce fire-safe cigarettes because this could implicate them legally because of previous fires, and because the fire-safe product may remind consumers that smoking also kills in other ways. A 1986 letter from the CEO of British-American Tobacco to the CEO of its Canadian subsidiary, Imasco, which owns Imperial Tobacco Ltd., justified the hesitation this way: "In attempting to develop a 'safe' cigarette you are, by implication, in danger of being interpreted as accepting that the current product is 'unsafe' and this is not a position I think we should take." — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Number of health professionals not keeping pace

Although there were 48 000 more health professionals in Canada in 1997 than in 1988, an increasing population means that the number of workers per 10 000 people actually declined by 1.7% over the period, from 185 to 182. The Canadian Institute for Health In-

formation reports that only a handful of professions experienced a decrease, but they were the largest ones. The number of doctors per 10 000 Canadians declined by 0.3%, while the number of registered nurses dropped by 5.2%. The biggest decrease was

among medical laboratory technologists, where the overall number fell by 10.8% and the number per population declined by 20%. Among the areas experiencing large increases were chiropractic, which rose by 40.3%, to 4472 practitioners. — *CMAJ*