

committee's report. In the end, if you don't have a roof over your head, how can you have mental health?" The 2006 federal budget set aside approximately \$800 million for affordable housing, in cooperation with the provinces.

Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai, president of the Canadian Medical Association, called the report a "visionary roadmap" and said that Canada's doctors support the recommendations as being "both practical and strategic." — Margot Andresen, Ottawa

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Dire warnings redux

Health Canada is considering new, even more graphic images on tobacco products to reinforce the negative health effects of smoking — a move that is being both lauded and criticized.

Cynthia Callard, executive director of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, says the 16 colour pictures that now grace cigarette packages — including images of yellow, rotting teeth, a limp cigarette warning of impotence, a pregnant woman smoking — are powerful, cost-effective tools in the fight against smoking.

Canada led the world in 2001 when it launched the 16 coloured pictures on packages coupled with 16 different warnings inside packages with quitting tips. Brazil and other countries soon followed.

Since then, Canadian smoking rates have declined 2% (from 5.4 million

smokers 15 and older in 2001 to just over 5 million during the first half of 2005). Anyone suggesting this is insignificant, says Callard, is missing the complexity of the equation.

Studies have shown that these pictures and the messages, which must cover 50% of the tobacco package, have registered strongly with smokers and increased motivation to quit, says Callard.

The time has come, however, to replace the now stale images, Callard says.

Evidence from a focus group study conducted by Health Canada last year, and echoed in other studies, indicates that while the old images still get noticed, many smokers now avoid those they dislike (by rejecting certain packages at point of purchase) and rationalizing why the messages don't apply to them (e.g., I'm too young to get sick).

The new images were tested last year on 4 groups of smokers (2 in Halifax, 2 in Montréal) 18 years and older and included photo-shopped images of a pregnant woman and a fetus, both smoking, and a man dying of lung cancer as his wife and daughter sit next to him. A Health Canada spokesperson said the goal was to test basic concepts and reactions. A final decision on new images has not been reached, and new pictures are not expected before late 2007 or 2008.

The Non-Smokers Rights Association, however, is not impressed with Health Canada's new shock ads.

Executive Director Garfield Mahood says the concepts under review focus on individual responsibility instead of the product as the cause of problems. He fears new messages will do little to reduce the 47 000 deaths a year caused by smoking.

"We're dealing with an epidemic, and epidemics require dramatic, aggressive, earth-shaking responses from governments," says Mahood. "And this is not what we're seeing with the latest round of warnings." — Pauline Comeau, Ottawa

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Full clinical trial disclosure needed: expert

Legislation is required to force pharmaceutical companies to disclose clinical trial information to Canadians, says Dr. Andreas Laupacis of the Canadian Expert Drug Advisory Committee (CEDAC).

Laupacis, who emphasized that he was speaking as an individual, told attendees at a recent Centre for Health Services and Policy Research conference that he is "enormously frustrated" by how long it is taking to bring more transparency to the system.

Pharmaceutical companies don't make complete information about the original trial protocols and outcomes available, he noted. "We see only a few outcome measures from a trial. Are we getting all the information about harm?"

CEDAC is an independent committee of 11 experts in drug therapy and evaluation who review the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of new prescription drugs. It makes recommendations to Common Drug Review members (including all the provinces and territories except Quebec) about which drugs publicly funded drug plans should list in their formularies, thus making them eligible for reimbursement.

"I lose sleep" over some of CEDAC's recommendations, Laupacis told the conference on national pharmaceutical strategies in February.

One such decision involved whether to list a new, very expensive cancer drug. No good randomized controlled trials had been conducted and the evidence to support the drug was based on some evidence of tumour shrinkage, not on patient outcome, he said. They decided not to list it.



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These new images are designed to shock smokers