

Antismoking MDs use fighting words as they take aim at tobacco sales by pharmacies

Charlotte Gray

Voluntary constraints on the sale of tobacco products in pharmacies don't work," says Dr. James Walker of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada. "We need aggressive legislation. That's the only way to put a stop to this tobacco epidemic."

Fighting words. But Walker and Dr. David Esdaile, a colleague from the antismoking organization, were in a fighting mood during a Feb. 11 press conference where they released the results of a survey of pharmacies that sell tobacco products in the Ottawa-Carleton area. One-quarter of all tobacco sales in Canada begin at the drugstore cash register.

The survey was prompted by recommendations concerning the sale and advertising of tobacco products that were established by the Ontario College of Pharmacists on June 17, 1991. The college called for the elimination of tobacco sales in pharmacies by July 1, 1993, and proposed two interim steps: by Oct. 1, 1991, all tobacco products should be behind service counters, and by Jan. 1, 1992, displays and activities advertising and promoting tobacco should be discontinued by pharmacies.

How have drugstores in the Ottawa area reacted to the proposals? According to the convictions of their owners, it appears. Of the 114 pharmacies surveyed, 48 (42%) do not sell tobacco in any form. Of the 66 pharmacies that sell tobacco, 41 displayed cigarettes on, beside or in front of the service counter, and 61 were advertising and promoting tobacco in signs,

displays or advertising material.

The results are an improvement on the findings of a previous survey, conducted in June 1989. At that time, only 23 pharmacies had banned tobacco sales. "So we are having some effect," says Walker.

The thing that particularly disturbs Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada is that most of the pharmacies that have ignored the college recommendations belong to two chains: Shoppers Drug Mart and Pharma Plus Drugmart. None of the pharmacies belonging to these chains complies with the college's recommendations. Imasco Inc. owns both Shoppers Drug Mart and Imperial Tobacco, which is the number one tobacco retailer in Canada, and Walker suggests this "intimate corporate tie makes voluntary compliance unlikely." Pharma Plus, he suggests, simply puts "financial gain ahead of the health of Canadians."

Since voluntary compliance does not work when drugstore chains are involved, Walker's organization wants the Ontario government to prohibit by legislation the sale, advertising and promotion of tobacco products in all accredited pharmacies. Meanwhile, it thinks the Ontario College of Pharmacists should redouble its efforts to encourage compliance with its guidelines, and should work with Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada to lobby for legislation.

The physicians make a convincing case. According to the latest estimate, 38 000 Canadians die every year because of smoking — their deaths are either directly or indirectly attributable to tobacco use. "Pharmacists throughout

Canada have recognized the essential incompatibility of tobacco sales and the pharmacist's role as a health care provider," the doctors argued in a brief handed out to reporters at the press conference.

However, persuading the provincial government to act may prove an uphill battle. Walker says his association has had meetings with the provincial minister of health, Frances Lankin, and she is "sympathetic." But only Quebec has made serious attempts to eliminate the sale of tobacco in pharmacies. Two years ago Alberta developed proposals to eliminate such sales, and then backtracked a year later and recommended voluntary guidelines. Legislation means taking on the tobacco companies, and cash-strapped provincial governments may be reluctant to face a powerful lobby that will accuse them of being too keen to regulate.

"We could put a stop to this tobacco epidemic now if we could stop stores selling to minors," argues Walker. "Everyone who smokes begins before they reach age 20." Young Canadians are a key market for the tobacco companies — witness their introduction of "kiddie packs" designed to put cigarettes within the price range of the young. Walker says annual sales to youngsters total \$400 million in Canada. "[Young people] are pretty valuable to an industry that says it doesn't pitch its advertising to them," he maintains.

But prosecutions for selling to minors are rare. The only case Walker mentioned was the 1989 conviction of a Toronto pharmacy. It belonged to the Shoppers Drug Mart chain. ■

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