

BC's Strategy to Protect Kids from Tobacco Addiction

The problem

Tobacco use is having a devastating impact on British Columbia and Canada:

- nation-wide, an estimated \$5 billion a year is spent to treat tobacco-related illnesses, placing great stress on our Medicare system;
- tobacco kills nearly 6,000 British Columbians and 45,000 Canadians each year – four times as many as die from all other drugs, car accidents, suicides, homicides and AIDS, combined;
- world-wide, it's expected the global death toll of tobacco each year will very soon equal the total death toll of the Holocaust.

Tobacco addiction is one of the greatest threats facing our young people:

- a teenager who smokes just two full cigarettes has an 85 per cent chance of ultimately becoming addicted;
- 95 per cent of high school seniors who smoke say they will quit within two years of graduation, but eight years later three quarters of them are still addicted.

Despite the best efforts of many Canadians, the problem is getting worse:

- in 1996, cigarette consumption in Canada increased to an average of 1,734 cigarettes per person;
- the Canadian tobacco industry sold 1.78 billion more cigarettes in 1996 than it did in 1995 – the equivalent of 244,000 new pack-a-day smokers.

The tobacco industry

Canada's tobacco companies are major players in a highly profitable multinational industry.



This industry is powerful and influential. For example, the Imasco conglomerate owns Imperial Tobacco. In the most recent published figures, Imasco generated just 14 per cent of its total revenues from tobacco, but 51 per cent of its profits.

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World-wide, the tobacco industry has a shameful record:

- challenging the right of governments to protect children from this potentially fatal drug addiction;
- claiming that it doesn't market its products to children, while carrying on a subtle and effective marketing campaign aimed at kids;
- denying the fatal effects of its products, while actively working to recruit young people as what it calls 'replacement smokers' for those it kills;
- actively working to suppress innovations that would make its products less harmful.

Prevention efforts in BC

British Columbia has introduced a comprehensive Tobacco Reduction Strategy, designed to protect young people from tobacco and the tobacco industry, and to reduce tobacco use by British Columbians.

In the past two years, provincial funding for tobacco reduction efforts increased by 150 per cent, from \$2 million to over \$5 million.

We are working closely with public health organizations and regional health boards to carry out a range of public education, prevention and cessation initiatives.

We have increased our efforts to protect kids through:

- **expanded education initiatives** - including school-based prevention programs such as the Critics' Choice contest, 5 hard-hitting 30-second television messages about the effects of tobacco use and the award-winning www.tobaccofacts.org web site;
- **cracking down on the sale of tobacco to minors** - including heavier fines and longer suspensions for those who breach tobacco sales regulations, doubled funding to regions to support enforcement, and new training for tobacco enforcement officers.

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British Columbia is taking the next step

Our province believes that any attempt to deal with the tobacco epidemic without dealing with the tobacco industry itself simply can't be fully successful.

That's why British Columbia is taking a three-pronged approach to fighting the tobacco epidemic. Our goal is to:

- expose the truth about the dangers of tobacco and the behaviour of the tobacco industry in pushing this lethal addictive drug to our children;
- pursue justice by holding the tobacco industry accountable, for the first time ever, for the damage it's done targeting kids and hiding the true danger of tobacco;
- achieve improved public health by protecting young people from tobacco addiction and by helping smokers quit.

This kind of approach has been very successful in the United States, and has brought that country to the verge of very significant change in how the tobacco industry does business, and ultimately how young people are protected.

In June 1997 the BC Legislature unanimously passed the *Tobacco Damages Recovery Act*, enabling the government or BC residents to take tobacco companies to court to recover health care and related costs caused by tobacco use.

This year, the BC government has introduced three more pieces of legislation that will work together to force the industry to be accountable for its actions and its products, and the harm they do:

- amendments to the *Tobacco Sales Act* will empower government to require tobacco companies to disclose to the public the ingredients in tobacco and tobacco smoke, and to warn the public about the health hazards of tobacco use;
- the new *Tobacco Fee Act* will require tobacco manufacturers who want to sell their products in BC to be licensed and pay licensing fees totalling \$20 million. Government will use the fees to pay for programs that prevent kids from starting to smoke and help others who want to quit;

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- amendments to the *Tobacco Damages Recovery Act* reflect new information about the practices of the tobacco industry, revealed through Minnesota's recent court case, and create a level playing field for legal action in BC to recover health costs from the industry.

Legal action is the key to success. Legal action will force the industry to:

- admit the truth about how it portrays itself as good corporate citizens while actively working to get young people addicted;
- pay the future costs of prevention, cessation and treatment programs; and
- change its behaviour and its products so the health of British Columbians is better protected.

British Columbia's ultimate goal is a public health agenda no longer undermined by the tobacco industry, but supported by it.

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