

Candy Coating the Truth: The availability of flavored tobacco .

by Annie Duchesne

It was a drizzly Monday morning when I stepped into a downtown tobacco shop to buy my first pack of smokes. I stood in front of the cash register feeling a little nervous. The shopkeeper was very friendly and helpful. He drew back the metal coverings behind the cash to reveal hundred of brightly packaged tobacco products. When I asked for flavored tobacco, he offered me clove cigarettes, little cigars in milkshake flavors like cherry, vanilla and chocolate, and chewing tobacco in varieties such as citrus, berry and mint. The spread was impressive. Delicious scents wafted from the packages.

As an agent for Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada (PSC), I had been charged with the task of collecting samples of flavored tobacco product in Ottawa's downtown area. Due to a law passed two years ago restricting the sale of flavored tobacco, I fully expected that these products would be few and far between. In reality I found 19 different products in over 60 different flavors.

Bill C-32, passed in July 2009, is an amendment to Canada's Tobacco Act. The aim of the bill is to prevent youth from taking up smoking by banning certain flavoring additives in cigarettes, cigar wraps and little blunts. The bill states that "the use of certain flavors, such as fruit and chocolate, in these tobacco products is believed to induce youth to smoke." It was considered to be a breakthrough success at the time of its induction. However, tobacco companies were a few steps ahead.

I considered the multitude of options on the counter and finally decided on five different samples: three packs of mini cigars, a can of long cut, chewing tobacco and a pack of little "exotic spicy clove" cigarillos. These products came in a variety of flavors. I chose vanilla, cafe moka, cherry and berry.

As I visited more stores, my collection became more extensive. Perhaps the most shocking product was the "adjustable cigar": a single, flavored tobacco cigar that had been triple-wrapped in flavored blunt wraps. It was packaged in a sleek, lipgloss-like container. The cigar retailed for \$6, the price of a few candy bars. The saleswoman assured me that I could remove the extra blunt wraps and use them to roll my own flavored cigars. She didn't recommend that I smoke the cigar with all the wraps. It would be too strong. I saw varieties like "blueberry bomb", "liquid honey", "bahama mama", and "VSOP cognac".

Tobacco companies have cleverly sidestepped the laws by altering their products in minor ways. For instance, Bill C-32 defines a "little cigar" as a cigar that has a cigarette filter or that weighs less than 1.4 grams. One tobacco company simply removed the filter on their little, flavored cigar and increased the weight slightly making it legal for sale.



Other products, such as chewing tobacco, are not addressed in the bill at all, even though they contain the same flavoring additives banned in the bill such as sweetener (sucralose). Chewing tobacco, in particular, has experienced a revival in the past few years due to its popularity among youth. When my younger cousin dropped by and saw the tobacco samples I bought, he picked up the can of berry, chewing tobacco and said, "I know this. Some of the guys on my high school sports teams used to use it."



Many owners of tobacco shops told me that the variety of flavored product available for sale has decreased since Bill C-32 came into effect. Yet, of all the shops I visited, only one did not carry any flavored product.



Of those that did carry flavored tobacco, one store carried over twelve different brands of cigarillo, clove, chewing tobacco, tobacco shisha, and blunt cigars with fifty-nine flavors to choose from. Another store carried just two varieties of flavored tobacco product, yet the owner was outraged when I described my mission for PSC. He accused people like me of trying to hurt his business. "It is not the big companies that suffer when these (surveys) are done and laws are passed," he argued. "It is the small businesses that pay and we are just trying to put bread on the table."

The most interesting encounter I had was with the owner of a popular smoking accessories store. When I attempted to buy some of the flavored tobacco he carried, the owner gave me a stern lecture about the dangers of smoking.



"Do not start," he said. "It is impossible to stop."

He told me about the teenagers that walk into his store and attempt to buy the flavored tobacco products. When he turns them away, some of the teens pay street people outside to buy the products for them.

"I don't allow it," he said. "I have children myself."

He is not worried about hurting his business by turning down these kinds of customers. "There are plenty of other things I can sell."

Ultimately, the businesses that make a profit selling items other than tobacco were friendlier and more accommodating towards me when I told them about my purpose. These are the businesses that will continue to thrive no matter what tobacco laws are passed.



For the moment it would seem that tobacco sellers have little to worry about. In the two years since Bill C-32 has come into effect, tobacco companies have found ways around Canadian law. They continue to offer a variety of flavored product. Parliament will have to push for tougher laws if they want to ban flavored tobacco product and protect youth from tobacco company incitements to try smoking.

Annie Duchesne has recently completed degrees in journalism and biology at Concordia University. She is passionate about advocating for public health"

Availability of flavored tobacco products within 1 km of Parliament Hill (and just as close to Health Canada's tobacco control office)

59 William St



57 William St



124 Bank St



254 Elgin St



50 Rideau St



152 Rideau St



151 Rideau St



124 Rideau St



241 Rideau St

