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Cape Bretoners and smoking - so what?

-by Larry Maxwell

This coming year, over 1600 Nova Scotians will die as a result of smoking. Among them will be several hundred Cape Bretoners.

Yes, smoking continues to be our leading cause of preventable illness, disability and premature death. In fact, tobacco claims many more lives than alcohol, illegal drug use, pollution, sexually transmitted infections, and motor vehicle accidents - combined!

It is no coincidence that we here in Nova Scotia have the highest smoking rate, the highest rate of nicotine addiction, as well as the heaviest smokers in the entire country.

The devastating burden of smoking may not be so obvious because we often speak of a loved one, co-worker, or neighbour as having passed away as a result of

cancer or heart disease. Also, smoking during pregnancy and exposure to secondhand smoke in the home are often the root cause of health problems among infants and children.

Despite this grim picture, there is much cause for optimism. We've actually taken important steps to reduce the impact of smoking. Higher tobacco taxes and laws which make it illegal to sell tobacco to adolescents are proven to lower youth smoking. Pharmacies no longer sell tobacco. Health warnings are on each package of cigarettes. There is also a trend where business and home owners are choosing to go smoke-free.

Perhaps the greatest cause for optimism lies within the community itself. There has been a huge shift in attitude among the public where smoking is concerned. Largely, this is due to increased public awareness. Parents are much more concerned about their children breathing secondhand smoke. Business owners are more likely to adopt smoke-free policies, not only because they now know the reported risks of going out of business are unfounded, but more importantly, out of concern for their employees' health.

Ten years ago, few among us would have thought a municipal council in Cape Breton would adopt a smoking bylaw. Just five years ago, even fewer would have thought the Cape Breton public would support one. Well they did and we do!

Likewise, there has been a change in attitude towards those who smoke. We now know that it is much more than people with a bad habit and lack of willpower. The grip of this addiction is immediately brought into focus upon seeing a pregnant woman smoking, or a hospital patient with an IV pole in one hand and a cigarette in the other. It is no longer seen as a battle between an inconsiderate smoker and an anti-smoking fanatic.