

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Big Tobacco and Taxes: Tricks of the Trade

Last month, the Board of Health wrote to every municipal councillor in the Peterborough area, warning that the tobacco industry may approach them to lobby for support to keep tobacco taxes low. Local councils in Peterborough County and City have supported various tobacco control measures in the past, including smoke free legislation, the protection of the public from second-hand tobacco smoke and the protection of our youth from tobacco industry products. Thanks to efforts like these, we have seen smoking rates decline, and exposures to second hand smoke evaporate in both indoor and many outdoor places. But “Big Tobacco” has not given up the fight – in fact, we should be prepared to see an escalation in the months ahead.

In 2012, Imperial Tobacco Canada Ltd. (ITCL) provided a confidential presentation to its parent company British American Tobacco on its objectives and tactics behind a decade-long campaign to “keep the contraband issue alive”. The presentation, which has been obtained by others, shows how Imperial Tobacco uses retailer and other business associations including the Ontario Convenience Stores Association (OCSA) and the National Coalition Against Contraband Tobacco (NCACT) as front groups for their lobbying efforts aimed at preventing effective regulations and tax increases.

The slide deck from ITCL demonstrates that the NCACT and the OCSA have worked on behalf of ITCL to convince Ontario municipalities of the importance of the contraband tobacco problem. The slide deck also makes clear that the anti-contraband campaign pursued by the NCACT and the OCSA in Ontario is designed in part to block tobacco excise tax increases and regulation of tobacco products generally. These campaign objectives were not communicated to municipalities by either the NCACT or the OCSA during meetings with municipal staff or councillors.

These front groups continue to lobby Queen’s Park against higher tobacco taxes and other regulations. Rothmans Benson and Hedges, has also started to ask municipal councillors for meetings to discuss contraband, most likely with the same kinds of messages that the NCACT and the OCSA have been using.

Ontario has the second lowest tobacco taxes among all of the provinces in Canada. Lower tobacco prices result in increased use, whereas tax increases on tobacco products deter smoking uptake, reduce tobacco consumption, increase smoking cessation, and address inequalities in smoking rates among social groups. Contrary to tobacco industry messaging, impartial research by the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit at the University of Toronto has shown that tobacco excise tax increases do not lead to large increases in contraband.



The federal government's new Tobacco and Vaping Products Act, introduced at the end of November, will deliver on the promise to implement plain packaging for tobacco. We can anticipate the gloves to come off, if Australia's recent experience is any indication. Working through front groups similar to NCACT and OCSA, the tobacco industry used "Nanny State" warnings in an attempt to sway the Australian public. Warnings that plain packaging would lead to decreased prices and more contraband have proven to be false. Credible research (research not funded by the tobacco industry) has found that implementation has been quick and easy for retailers.

Globally, many countries have moved, or are moving, to plain packaging because it works – rates of smoking have decreased where this tactic has been introduced. And as smoking tobacco remains the number one cause of preventable deaths in Ontario and in Canada, anything we can do to reduce its toll on our collective health and well-being is worth doing. Tobacco remains the only legal product that kills 50% of its users. We need to support all of our politicians, whether local, provincial or federal, to withstand the crafty and well-funded opposition that would prefer to have more of us addicted to, and harmed by tobacco products.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>