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Take smoking ban inside the home

Now that Ontario has introduced a province-wide ban on smoking in all enclosed public places and workplaces, it may be time to consider protecting residents of condominiums, multi-unit homes, attached and semi-detached dwellings and apartments from second-hand smoke originating in adjacent or nearby units.

This suggestion is made in a recently released background report by the Non-Smokers' Rights Association, or NSRA. Entitled *Exposure to Drifting Second-hand Smoke in Multi-Unit Dwellings*, the report notes that such smoke is a serious health hazard for many people living in what is essentially the same building. It is available on the NSRA website at <http://nsra-adnf.ca> and on this website at <http://www.aaron.ca>.

As society learns more about the dangers of exposure to second-hand smoke, it is ironic that many Ontarians can now go out and enjoy smoke-free experiences in bars, restaurants and many other public places, only to be unwillingly exposed to polluted air at home.

There is no longer any room for debate that second-hand smoke is more than a nuisance. It is a toxic soup of more than 4,000 chemicals.

As long ago as 1992, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency classified second-hand smoke as a Group A carcinogen.

More than 50 cancer-causing chemicals have been found in second-hand smoke, including arsenic, benzene and vinyl chloride.

Exposure to second-hand smoke is the third leading cause of preventable death in Canada, after smoking and alcohol abuse.

Health Canada estimates that every year some 700 Canadian non-smokers will die of heart disease and 300 will die of lung cancer as the result of prolonged exposure to second-hand smoke. Reputable health organizations worldwide have concluded that there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke.

No one would dispute anyone's right to smoke in their own residence, but a problem may arise for their neighbours when smoke emitted from the burning end of a cigarette (called second-hand smoke) drifts or seeps into an adjoining house, apartment or condominium unit from various sources, such as the following:

- open windows or doors, including patios and balconies
- electrical outlets, cable or phone jacks and ceiling fixtures
- cracks and gaps around sinks, countertops, windows, doors, floors, walls and ceilings
- a shared heating or ventilation system.

The seriousness of the issue of breathing unwanted cigarette smoke achieved considerable publicity late in May when 61-year-old Heather Crowe died of lung cancer just before the Smoke-Free Ontario Act came into force. Crowe never smoked a day in her life, but spent 40 years working in smoky bars and restaurants.

She became known for the television and radio commercials in which she told how she contracted lung cancer without ever having been a smoker.

Despite the laws and by laws which protect non-smokers from breathing cigarette or cigar smoke in the common areas of multi-unit dwellings, no legislative body has yet been prepared to address the issue of adults smoking in their own homes, whether or not the smoke affects other people.

According to the Non-Smokers' Rights Association report, in the absence of full co-operation from smoking tenants or owners in adjacent units, as well as the landlords, condominium boards and property managers, there may well be a need for tribunals, courts and lawmakers to address the issue.

(A word of disclosure here: I am volunteer chair of the NSRA, but the report was researched and written by staffer Pippa Beck without any involvement by me or the NSRA board.)

At the moment, claiming the right to breathe clean air in your own condominium unit, apartment or duplex can be an uphill struggle.

Those bothered by smoke from adjacent units are advised to attempt some form of negotiated resolution with their neighbours, property managers, condominium boards or landlords.

Many would argue that this issue crosses the line of acceptability by infringing on the rights of smokers in their own homes. As non-smokers have enjoyed increasingly more smoke-free workplaces and public places, some smokers no doubt see their rights as rapidly being usurped.

Although I have yet to see no-smoking clauses in condominium declarations or residential leases, it is possible that some do exist. And it is even more likely such prohibitions will become increasingly common in the near future.

It may also turn out to be a good marketing technique if landlords and builders of multi-unit residential units and condominiums begin advertising their projects as smoke-free. Buyers and tenants could therefore be assured that they would never be subject to migrating second-hand smoke.

My guess is that smoke-free condominiums, multiplexes and apartment buildings will attract more occupants than they will deter. This was the experience in many restaurants when they became smoke-free.

If the suggestion about prohibiting smoking in multi-unit private residences where smoke can travel to adjacent units seems a bit over the top, it may be good to remember that it wasn't that long ago when smoking in restaurants, theatres, offices, banks and elevators was commonplace.

Public opinion and attitudes change over time in a sophisticated society. This proposal might be one change for the better.