

# WHY IS THE HEALTH MINISTER BACKPEDALING ON PLANS TO FIGHT THE TOBACCO EPIDEMIC?



Health Minister  
Anne McLellan

## Five Questions for the Hon. Anne McLellan for World No-Tobacco Day

### Dear Minister McLellan:

Two years ago, to great fanfare, Health Minister Allan Rock and Finance Minister Paul Martin jointly announced the government's landmark tobacco control strategy. Two years later and almost a year and a half into your term as health minister, this strategy is in trouble.

The Rock/Martin announcement included a commitment of major funding to tobacco control and a new ministerial council to provide independent, outside expert advice to the health minister on tobacco policy. Later in the year, Mr. Rock announced that the government would ban dishonest 'light' and 'mild' labels on cigarettes. At the time, there seemed to be the beginning of an understanding that there had to be a government response to Big Tobacco appropriate for the treatment of an epidemic.

Two years later, serious action on tobacco has stalled. In fact, it's worse. You have been backpedaling on a number of issues. As we approach World No-Tobacco Day on May 31st, we are very concerned.

Minister, like the SARS epidemic, tobacco is a "public health crisis."<sup>1</sup> To date, SARS has caused the death of 27 Canadians. Infected water at Walkerton caused 7 deaths. Tainted blood led to an epidemic which may ultimately cause 3,000 deaths.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, your department estimates that the tobacco epidemic causes about 45,000 deaths every year!

You have a responsibility to protect the health of Canadians. Our responsibility is to inform the public when important health issues arise. We have five concerns:

**1 Why have you failed to stop the 'light' and 'mild' consumer fraud?** Acting on expert reports that identify cigarette descriptors like "light" and "mild" as false and misleading, Mr. Rock published a *Notice of Intent to Regulate*. This announced the government's intention to ban these terms. They help kids to start smoking. They keep smokers smoking, by offering false hope of health benefits from so-called low tar cigarettes. These terms are killing people.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. tobacco industry has been successfully sued for billions for this practice. The European Union has banned such terms.

Since you became minister, this critical reform is going nowhere. Why minister?

**2 Where are the regulations to curb tobacco promotions?** Canada has precedent-setting tobacco legislation. But for that legislation to be effective, it requires a minister who will use the powers under the *Tobacco Act* to introduce the law reform needed to reduce tobacco-caused disease. You could regulate promotional displays of tobacco. For example, 'power wall' cigarette displays, beside the candy in thousands of corner stores, normalize a deadly product in the minds of children. Why have you not produced a single regulation to curb such promotions?

**3 Why are you raiding the tobacco control fund?** The fund announced by Mr. Martin and Mr. Rock was to create a new source of stable funding for tobacco control in Canada. Less than two years into the programme, the tobacco control fund was raided of over \$13 million. And flying in the face of those promises of stable funding, more serious cuts to the programme are underway. Minister, how much do you plan to cut? Why are you breaking the promises made by Ministers Martin and Rock?

**4 Why have you gutted the Ministerial Advisory Council on Tobacco Control (MAC)?** At the 2001 announcement, your government presented MAC as a significant advance in tobacco control. Yet when you became minister, you cancelled MAC meetings and gutted its Terms of Reference.<sup>4</sup> You removed tobacco experts from MAC who were critical of government health policy and appointed members with little experience in tobacco control. A few days ago, four tobacco control experts resigned from MAC in frustration claiming it is a "waste of time." Why have you weakened MAC?

**5 Why are you not holding the industry accountable for its role in the epidemic?** Minister, if there is a malaria epidemic, one focuses efforts at prevention on the behaviour of the mosquito. "Best practice" efforts for the tobacco epidemic involve focusing attention on the predatory behaviour of tobacco manufacturers. Award-winning tobacco control campaigns in the U.S.A. have shown the effectiveness of this 'tobacco industry denormalization' approach.<sup>5</sup>

You have taken this strategy in the reverse direction, placing almost the entire responsibility for the tobacco epidemic on individual rather than corporate behaviour. Children don't create epidemics. Cavalier industries can. And governments must use their powers to stop them when they do. Minister, what are you doing to hold this industry responsible for tobacco deaths?

### We wish to be fair

Last year, Canada experienced one of the largest single year declines in tobacco consumption in years. But that decline was largely due to tobacco tax increases. Other measures, like Canada's new tobacco warnings, influenced the decline. But most of these measures were the result of work completed before you became minister.

Regardless of last year's decline, we still have 45,000 deaths a year from tobacco industry products. Any failure to introduce needed reforms will lead to more premature death and disease.

Minister, we urge you to again make tobacco control a priority. Delays in addressing epidemics cause death.

Endnotes: 1. Statement by a panel of experts including Dr. Fraser Mustard and Professor Bob Evans published by the National "Tobacco OR Kids" Campaign, Toronto, 1998. 2. Sarah Edmonds, "Canada's blood supply system blamed in AIDS deaths," *Reuters*, April 30, 1996. 3. See "The 'light' and 'mild' consumer fraud" at [www.nsr-a-adnf.ca](http://www.nsr-a-adnf.ca). 4. See an analysis of the revised Terms of Reference at [www.nsr-a-adnf.ca](http://www.nsr-a-adnf.ca). 5. The "tobacco industry denormalization" strategy involves showing Canadians why the tobacco industry is not a normal industry and why its dishonest, destructive behaviour positions the industry outside the norms of legitimate business.

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