



Original residents Mary and Robin Edwardes submitted these pictures of their hot tub . . . with snow drifts three feet high above the tub.



Above, left: Micheal Chatelois took these pictures of workers shovelling the snow off the roof of Zellers store last week. Right: Review freelance photographer Sylvain Lauwers took this photograph showing his daughter, Rachelle shovelling off the roof of her playhouse recently.



This photograph certainly gives a clear impression of what Canadians are up against when they open the door after snowstorms such as the one we experienced during the weekend of March 8 and 9. A wall of snow pressed up against the door prompted someone to put some bottles of beer on ice, as it were. This photograph comes to us from Lydia Kennedy.



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Contraband success counters anti-smoking measures

By Dominique Millette
At least half of all cancers are preventable – and lung cancer's at the top of the list, with smoking as the main culprit.

However, recent mega-million dollar busts in Ontario and Québec suggest contraband tobacco is putting a dent in prevention and cessation efforts.

On March 5, news surfaced that RCMP raids had netted more than two million cigarettes over three days in Eastern Ontario. The value of the tobacco seized was estimated at \$397,365. The bust involved men and women from Ottawa, Cornwall, Alexandria and Akwesasne. One youth was also arrested and police further questioned a 61-year-old Vankleek Hill man.

This seems to be just the tip of the iceberg: a May 2007 article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) quoted the RCMP director of custom and excise as saying there has been a 1,700 per cent increase in the number of tobacco products seized by the national police force since 2001. Québec alone is fighting an overwhelming tide. In a March 13 press release this year, the Association nationale des distributeurs aux petites surfaces alimentaires (NACDA), which represents retailers, declared that taxpayers are short \$300 million per year because of contraband.

All of this bodes ill for anti-smoking efforts: "Anything which makes available cheap tobacco can be expected to contribute to increased adolescent and adult smoking (and addiction), and diminished likelihood of successful cessation by would-be quitters," notes Dr. Andrew Pipe, Chief of the Division of Prevention and Rehabilitation at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute.

In a March 26 press release, the Canadian Cancer Society chimed in by stat-

ing it "was disappointed by the lack of significant contraband tobacco prevention measures in this year's Ontario budget. The increasing availability of cheap cigarettes threatens to undermine the achievements made in tobacco control in Ontario, especially in the area of youth prevention."

More smokers in Eastern Ontario and Western Québec

Meanwhile, Eastern Ontario residents have a higher declared rate of smoking – 21 per cent, or 36,195 – than those of the province as a whole: 15 per cent, or 2,290,088. The overall rate in Canada is 19 per cent. The numbers come from a 2005 study on health across the country. Figures are higher all around on the Québec side. In Argenteuil, according to 2003 figures from the regional Département de lutte contre le tabagisme, 33 per cent of the population smoked daily, compared to 26 per cent for La belle province in general.

Is it because of the proximity of the Akwesasne reserve near Cornwall, which borders Ontario, Québec and New York State, and is alleged to be the biggest source of contraband in the country? And to what extent are the figures linked to the many smoke shacks dotting Highway 344 near Oka and Kanehsatake?

While it's hard to establish any direct causal link between the availability of cheap contraband cigarettes and smoking rates, many studies show correlations that are hard to discount... so to speak. Figures in the above-quoted CMAJ article illustrate the point. The ready availability of cheap tobacco on Canada's reserves dovetails with a more-than-double-the-national average smoking rate amongst native

people, according to a 2006 study put together by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). Girls aged 15-17 have a smoking rate of 61 per cent, or four times the national average. The rate for boys the same age is 47 per cent, compared to a national rate of 13 per cent.

A political nightmare

Contraband levels are climbing today just like they did in the 90s, when Québec estimated up to 60 per cent of all cigarettes sold there were black market. But there's a crucial difference: back then, the cigarettes came from major multinational manufacturers. Now, with a heavy export tax closing that loophole, native manufacturers have taken up the slack... and created a political and policing nightmare for enforcers.

One of the few compensations First Nations have obtained for systematic expropriation is the right to engage in commerce without taxation, at least on-reserve. Just when this becomes illegal is the political hot potato that keeps contraband in the headlines. The law is clear. The politics are incendiary. In 2004, Mohawk protesters barricaded the highway through Kanehsatake and laid siege to the police station, where 67 armed officers were holed up. Chief James Gabriel's house was burned down. Some say the motive was Gabriel's desire to crack down on the smoke shacks along the 344, which the RCMP call illegal. The community views them otherwise. So do radical native activists, who extend this viewpoint to smuggling as well as to on-reserve sales to non-natives. In a document entitled Preparing for Invasion: A guide to the current threats against the Mohawk Nation, one can read the following: "Massive military and po-



A smoke shack along Highway 344 near Oka, Québec offers drive-through service: cheap cigarettes are hurting anti-smoking efforts. (photo D. Millette)

lice operations are deemed by the government to be warranted against the very people it has kept drinking dirty water and living in sub-standard housing, at the very time when we have begun to develop self-reliant economic strategies to improve our quality of life."

Echoing native health professionals who deal with the consequences daily, Dr. Pipe doesn't buy this argument: "It's important to realize that those participating in smuggling are ultimately harming the health of their 'customers' and the communities of which they are a part," he points out.

Contraband and smoking by the numbers

Here are some figures from a November 2007 report entitled Contraband Cigarettes in Ontario, put out by the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit:

- 37 per cent of current

smokers in Ontario report ever purchasing cigarettes on reserves

- 26 per cent of current smokers report having bought at least one pack of cigarettes on reserves in the previous six months

- 12 per cent of current smokers report usually purchasing cigarettes on reserves

- At least 14 per cent of cigarettes smoked by current smokers were bought on reserves

- Based on the reported number of cigarettes purchased on reserves, the Ontario government failed to collect \$72.3 million in tax revenues between January 2005 and June 2006, and the federal government forfeited \$49.9 million during that period.

Furthermore, the report states: "Our finding that at least 14% of cigarettes are bought on reserves is a conservative estimate of the use of contraband tobacco products, as it does not include contraband cigarettes sold off reserve."

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