

Smoke-taxing the poor taxes us all

I was a smoker once, but not a real one. I fake-smoked. Sucked it in and expelled it through nose and mouth.

The reasons for such ridiculous behaviour were firmly rooted in ego. The real work of it lay in the ritual - flourishing the gold-leafed packet, the lighting up, the puffing, all done to impress on social occasions. It rarely worked, because every male did it for the same hopeless reasons...and because smokers stink. I couldn't tell that, though, because I came from a household of smokers.

Dad was on 40 a day and Mum tried to keep up. They smoked in the house, but worst of all they smoked in the car, sometimes for seven hours on end during a trip to Auckland, with the windows wound up tight, and my only relief the regular stops to be car-sick.

Starting work brought no respite. The Taranaki Herald newsroom was packed with smokers and nobody would open the windows in winter. The news editor had a fag permanently affixed to her lip and a famous nicotine stain in her hair.

It was no better at the Auckland Star, just bigger and with a higher proportion of people with pipes and cigarillos, whose combined smog stained the air conditioning intakes crap-coloured. One of the old boys tried to tell me it was the hot lead in the air, but looking back I know better.

By then, though, I had abandoned the smoking affectation, because a bigger place had more like me who were beginning to realise the jeopardy. My conversion was complete when I was assigned the medical round and started to read scientific reports, one of which said every time we light up we expose ourselves to 1000 bad chemicals.

So, where are we with smoking now? How much progress has been made since Helen Clark's heroic efforts in the late 80s to outlaw it in the workplace? Official statistics tell us 4500 to 5000 people die each year from smoking-related causes - the same number as 1990.

What good has it all done? Aside from a snail-paced decline in smoker ranks from a third of the population to 17 percent (Maori and Pacific Island numbers remain stubbornly high), and the obvious benefits of going to work without breathing toxic air, the actual health gains - judged on death rate alone - have yet to appear

Death from smoking is a drawn-out fate, it seems, and possibly avoidable: my parents gave up abruptly when they were 45, and appeared to suffer no long-term consequences, dying in their 80s from unrelated causes.

It may be that the excellent work of medical professionals - backed by political will - won't achieve a drop in mortality in less time than a couple of generations. In other words, the benefits are slow to appear.

Which brings me to the sharp end of what I want to say: is political will taking the right direction? Aside from making money available for research, treatment and smoking-reduction measures, our current crop of politicians seems wedded to an idea that may be reaching the end of its usefulness - taxing.

Let me explain. A friend of a friend tells me his brother smokes 20 a day (he also reckons a couple he knows have a combined consumption of 80). The brother manages to hold his addiction partly at bay with anti-smoking lozenges. I checked our local dairy and found the

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average cigarette costs about \$1.12, meaning at 20-a-day the guy is spending more than \$8000 a year (the maths on the couple are too scary to contemplate).

Mr 20-a-day's only income is a WINZ sickness benefit of \$215 a week - from which he shells out \$157 on smokes. He has some savings, but they are rapidly disappearing on other living costs, such as rent and meals-on-wheels. When his savings are used up, he will presumably go to WINZ to get more money in order to survive...and keep smoking. That means you and I and other taxpayers will be footing even more of his addiction cost.

Ask yourself this: is continually adding tax to cigarettes becoming a self-defeating exercise? It might resemble political resolve, but does it now simply punish the poor - and by default all of us? If so, what should happen next in this very long end-game to remove a public menace, a battle that has no satisfactory outcome in sight?