

One in 4 Canadians smokes, Ottawa reports

Health Canada says the country was home to slightly more than 6 million smokers in 1999, and they accounted for 25% of the population aged 15 and older.

This is exactly half the proportion of smokers existing in 1965, when Ottawa began monitoring smoking data, but the Non-Smokers' Rights Association says that is not good enough.

"Absolutely, we can do better than 25%," says Francis Thompson, a policy analyst with the association. "In Sweden the rate is less than 20%, in California it's 18% and in Massachusetts it's less than 20%."

The results from the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey, published in *Trends in Smoking, 1999*, represent interviews with 22 013 Canadians conducted throughout that year. "It is encouraging to note that since 1981 all age groups have experienced a decline in smoking," the report says. "Nevertheless, since 1990 it is the older groups, those 25 years and older, who have

shown more significant reductions in prevalence."

Although smoking by teenagers has declined significantly from the high-water mark of 43% set in 1981, it appears to have plateaued at 28% for the last 6 years. Thompson says that compares poorly with results in California, where youth smoking has declined to 6.9%.

"They spent the money to fight it," he said. For instance, California has committed US\$115 million to fighting smoking in the current fiscal year, compared with the \$20 million committed by the federal government. Thompson says Massachusetts spends \$11 per capita fighting smoking annually, compared with the 67 cents spent by the federal government.

Among those 15 and older, smoking is most popular in Quebec (30%), Nova Scotia (29%) and Newfoundland (28%); it is least popular in British Columbia (20%) and Ontario and Manitoba (23%). Among men, those aged 20–22

have the highest prevalence of smoking (42%); the highest prevalence among women is also within the same age cohort (34%).

According to the research, 25% of Canada's daily smokers are "highly dependent," meaning that they light their first cigarette within 5 minutes of waking; this is an increase from 18% in 1994. Another 32% are considered to have "moderately high dependence" by lighting up within 6 to 30 minutes.

The report (www.tobacco-control.com) concludes that males (27%) are more likely to smoke than females (23%), with a "striking reversal" in smoking behaviour taking place between the mid-teens and mid-20s, when more males take up the habit.

Thompson thinks Canada could learn from California's experience. "They have attacked second-hand smoke aggressively. You can't smoke in bars, workplaces, malls and so on. They are actually making it difficult to get addicted." — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*