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THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2001

ASH CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE PROVINCIAL TOBACCO TAX INCREASE

Alberta's smoking rates are expected to stray further from the national average as the result of today's federal tobacco tax increase, contends Action on Smoking & Health. Increased tobacco taxes in central and eastern Canada will likely lead to lower smoking rates in those provinces. However Alberta's smoking rates will not be affected unless the Alberta government introduces an immediate tobacco tax increase of its own.

Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec now share the dubious distinction of having the lowest cigarette prices in the United States and Canada as the result of today's \$4 per carton increase in eastern and central Canada.

"We urge the Alberta government to make good on its election promise to reduce tobacco use by introducing an immediate tax increase on tobacco" said Les Hagen, executive director. "Today's federal tax increase will only widen the gap between smoking rates in Alberta and the rest of the country" Hagen added.

Over the past two years, Alberta's smoking rates have climbed above the national average. In 1999, smoking prevalence among people aged 15 years and over in Alberta was 26%. This compares with a rate of 25% across Canada.

"Health Minister Gary Mar has stated his intentions to pursue tobacco tax increases" added Hagen. "In light of today's announcement, we hope that he will urge his government colleagues to take immediate action".

Alberta's tobacco taxes are now among the lowest in Canada at only \$14 per carton of 200 cigarettes. This compares with a \$22 per carton tax rate in British Columbia. Not surprisingly, British Columbia has the lowest smoking rate in the country. In contrast, Alberta has the highest smoking rate in western Canada.

Tobacco taxes are one of the most effective strategies to reduce tobacco use. A 10% increase in price will reduce consumption by about 4% among adults and by as much as 15% among adolescents.

Alberta is a textbook example of this relationship. Alberta realized a 43% drop in per capita cigarette consumption between 1986 and 1991 that was largely the result of a 78% increase in cigarette prices. This price increase resulted mainly from federal and provincial tax increases during the same period.

ASH is western Canada's leading health organization devoted solely to tobacco control and prevention.

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