

campaign for a **smoke-free** alberta

- News Release -

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ALBERTA SHOULD JOIN SUIT AGAINST TOBACCO INDUSTRY

(Edmonton) Health groups are urging the Alberta government to join Ontario, B.C. and five other provinces in taking legal action to recover healthcare costs from the tobacco industry.

Yesterday, the Ontario government became the seventh province to introduce Medicare cost recovery legislation intended to make the tobacco industry pay compensation for a portion of the treatment costs resulting from its deceptive marketing practices.

British Columbia and New Brunswick have already initiated legal action against the tobacco industry to recover Medicare costs. The New Brunswick lawsuit is led by a consortium of major law firms at virtually no cost to the government.

"The Alberta government should join other provinces in making the tobacco industry pay for its share of healthcare costs resulting from its deceptive marketing practices" said Dr. Charl Els of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada. "These practices include targeting youth, the promotion of so-called 'light' cigarettes, and fighting government measures to reduce tobacco use. These objectionable strategies have ultimately increased the burden on our healthcare system. The tobacco industry must be held to account for its actions and for its enormous impact on the quality of life of Albertans".

In the 1990s, all 50 American states launched legal action against the tobacco industry to recover a portion of Medicare treatment costs resulting from tobacco use. In 1998, the states agreed to a \$25 billion out-of-court "master settlement agreement" with the industry in addition to a number of important marketing restrictions.

"The Alberta government has a tremendous opportunity to help offset the rising costs of healthcare while holding the tobacco industry accountable for its actions" said Angeline Webb of the Canadian Cancer Society—Alberta/NWT Division. "Tobacco use cost the Alberta healthcare system an estimated \$470 million in 2002 alone according the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Our healthcare system is under tremendous strain and the tobacco industry has contributed to the burden. Tobacco is the only legal product that kills one-half of its users when used exactly as intended by its manufacturers".

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The Alberta government is already recovering third-party Medicare costs from automobile insurers. Under the *Hospitals Act*, automobile insurers must contribute to a multi-million dollar fund that covers the medical treatment of injuries resulting from traffic collisions.

By not pursuing legal action against the tobacco industry, the Alberta government could potentially sacrifice billions of dollars in unclaimed damages.

Tobacco is the leading avoidable cause of illness and premature death in Alberta. An estimated 3,000 Albertans die from tobacco use each year—the equivalent of one in every five deaths.

The Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta is a coalition of prominent health organizations who are working to reduce tobacco use in Alberta.

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