

Bill Rea ? Smoking is getting rare



Weedless Wednesday has come and gone, for the benefit of those of you who keep track of such things.

Frankly, I was a little surprised at how little attention was paid to it in the media. Indeed, I wouldn't have been aware of the day, had I not received an email that very morning (Jan. 21), containing a press release from the Province.

It was entitled A decade of progress toward a smoke-free Ontario, and I dismissed it, at first, as a case of the Wynne government very liberally patting itself on the back. Remember, this was the day after Barack Obama's State of the Union address, and I had already had enough with political victory laps to last me a week or so.

But it also occurred to me the lack of publicity for Weedless Wednesday really spoke volumes. The fact is smoking is not nearly as common as it used to be.

I'm sure we've all heard stories dating back 50 years or so, of doctors suggesting their patients take up smoking as a method of relieving stress. I think you'd have a hard time finding a doctor advocating something like that today.

There was a time when just about everyone in my own circle smoked. I guess it's a fact that smokers like to hang around with other smokers. Indeed, almost 31 years ago, when I was being interviewed for my first newspaper job, the editor, aware that I was a smoker, told me everyone in the office smoked, so I would fit right in. The guy was a natural born recruiter.

I was prompted to think of all the smokers in my current life, and it didn't take long to account for them all. With the exception of my aunt, I can't think of a single person I'm in regular contact with who still smokes.

I guess all of us reformed smokers had their individual reasons for quitting, and the concerns over the possible health risks would be prominent among them. That was part of the reason why I wanted to quit, but it was still hard to do.

I started smoking in high school because many of the people I hung around with smoked. I burned about a pack and a half per day through my late teens and 20s. During that time, I found cigarettes were becoming more and more expensive (to this day, I cannot figure out how I was able to afford the habit). I also found myself running out of places where smoking was permitted.

And then there was that night in January 1989 (about a week before my 31st birthday) when I watched a documentary about addictions. It prompted me to ask myself how long I could go without a cigarette, as I resolved to give it a try. Much to my astonishment, the answer was on the order of six months.

Thus I often tell people that quitting smoking is easy, but you have to come at the problem the right way. I didn't take some pledge to never smoke again, and then rely on my own resolve. I had already done that a couple of times, and the resolve never lasted very long. Had I tried that approach after watching that documentary, I probably would have put away two packs to mark my 31st birthday.

The way I quit (and understand that while it was all on the spur-of-the-moment, it also worked) was the way I described above. I made a bet with myself, and I won.

The release I received from the Province Weedless Wednesday raised a number of points of success for the efforts to make Ontario smoke-free. There were 10 of them, all mentioning dates when these various measures took effect (which I'll not waste space listing them here, since the only reason I have them is it's part of the effort to make the current government look good). Coincidentally, all of those dates came after the Liberals came to power in Ontario ? hence my earlier cynical references to a victory lap.

Despite that, there is definitely progress that's being made.

You're now not supposed to smoke in enclosed public and work places. There are restrictions on the retail promotion of tobacco

products and a ban on the display of tobacco products. It's against the law to smoke in a vehicle passengers younger than 16. There are other such laws. You're not supposed to smoke around playgrounds in which children play, or publicly-owned sports fields.

As well, as of a couple of weeks ago, you're not supposed to smoke on bar or restaurant patios. I can see a lot of people complaining about going too far with that one. But I well recall an occasion about 15 years ago when I was taking my lunch on a patio of an establishment in Toronto (actually it was Wayne Gretzky's, not far from what is today known as the Roger's Centre). As I ate, downwind from a table at which people were smoking, I detected the whiff of cigarette smoke, and actually found it annoying. Even I was surprised at that.

When I first saw that item from the Province a couple of Wednesdays ago, I thought if the government really wanted to make Ontario smoke free, why didn't it just ban tobacco?

Upon reflection, I realized that would be a bit too simple and simplistic. It wouldn't work, unless surrounding jurisdictions were prepared to do the same thing, and that's not likely. Besides, there are elderly people in our society who have been smoking for many years without much apparent harm. Forcing these people to quit might be more harmful than letting them continue. There would be a lot of stress involved.

I actually have a hard time understanding how people these days get into smoking. Tobacco companies aren't allowed to advertise these days. You don't see products on display in stores any more. And store keepers actually ask to see ID to make sure tobacco purchaser is at least 19 years of age. There have been numerous times when I've had young people approach me in the street, asking me to buy them smokes. I always say "no."

Warning kids about the dangers of smoking is not likely to prevent them from taking up the habit. I knew the dangers when I started, but I started anyway. I was a kid, therefore I figured I'd live forever.

I would think the way to prevent them from smoking is to make tobacco hard to come by for them.

The fewer are the kids who get onto smoking, the easier it will be for the habit to die a natural death through attrition.

Maybe I was a bit too harsh in my comments about the government release.