

What *really* happens when you ban smoking

Hugh Tobin

Smoking bans seem to have strong public support and are being rolled out all over the world. In Australia, graphic warnings have been introduced on cigarette packaging, and many States have banned smoking on public transport and at tram, bus and train shelters. Already, in Victoria, more than 330 on-the-spot fines have been issued to commuters since the bans came into effect on 1 March 2006. On 31 July this year, smoking was made illegal in Western Australian pubs and clubs. Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania will ban smoking in clubs and bars in 2007 and bans have applied in NSW for over 12 months.

But policy-makers need to consider the consequences of this unprecedented government intervention being imposed on our lives. Smoking is, after all, legal.

It is questionable whether smoking bans inside venues will even have their intended effect. A paper published by the Australian National University's Centre for Economic Policy Research this year found that while taxes on cigarettes had a significant impact on reducing passive smoking, banning smoking in public places had, on average, no effect at all. Instead, bans can adversely *increase* people's exposure by displacing smokers to private places where they contaminate non-smokers, primarily children. It seems perverse to be shifting smoking back into the home, particularly considering that 94 per cent of the \$5 billion spent on health care costs relating to passive smoking were spent on children.

Bans on popular activities like

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smoking always have unintended effects—it is hard to stop individuals from doing the things they enjoy, legal or illegal. One of the more unexpected problems from the smoking bans that has already been noticed in some venues is problems with sweat and other odours. According to Scotland's *Sunday Mail*, nightclub owners are pumping scented smoke onto dance-floors to deodorise sweat and flatulence smells which were formerly masked by cigarette smoke. From personal experience in Sydney nightclubs, where bans are already in place, it seems that Australian clubs are having a similar problem, and clubs in Melbourne are spending money preparing their venues for this consequence.

In New Zealand, where bans have been implemented since 2004, the New Zealand Press Association reported in

September that illegal bars have been set up in garages and basements with people taking advantage and charging for admittance. Hikurangi Hotel (a legal establishment) spent more than \$8,000 constructing a covered outdoor area for smokers before the smoke-free legislation was introduced on December 2004, but still found takings fell by about a third. The hotel owner said that the disappearing patrons were frequenting garage bars in his township, which did not have to adhere to the smoke-free legislation or alcohol laws. 'What annoys me is that these places aren't covered by the same rules. If somebody lights up inside we can get fined. Plus there's all the regulations we have to comply with,' he said.

Apart from people simply avoiding licensed venues because of the laws, there are those finding new ways to bend the rules. Innovative new ways of delivering nicotine to the body are now being marketed. A beer which contains nicotine has been launched by a German company. Other people have converted to chewing tobacco, which then has to be spat out. In order to make chewing tobacco a more socially acceptable practice, Reynolds America has started selling pouches of tobacco which are absorbed through the cheek but don't involve chewing or spitting.

In Calabasas, in California, they have effectively banned smoking in all outdoor places. No doubt Australia will move towards regulations such as these in the future. But governments should remember that while they can make any regulations they like, they can never predict the consequences of such regulations—such as body odour and flatulence problems.

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