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Shock therapy for smokers

BY ELLEN GOODMAN



BOSTON — Who ever accused the Canadians of being stodgy? The government north of the border is getting positively lurid.

On "Weedless Wednesday," Canada's national smoke-out day, the health minister revealed a proposal to re-decorate his country's

cigarette packages with full-color photographs of diseased body parts. Talk about lively — or should I say deadly? — graphics.

In the States, we are still running drab black-and-white surgeon general's warnings that no one reads, but our neighbors are ready to (dress) up the ante with attention-grabbing photographs of everything from a bad heart to a cancerous lung to a lipful of lesions. They even have a photograph to emphasize the link between smoking and impotence, although, in this case, Canadian reserve prevails: It's a picture of a limp cigarette.

Of course, it's possible that nothing will keep an addict from a fix. Remember the cigarettes with the skull and crossbones on the pack? Seen the Camel ad with a guy racing to his shelter as a meteorite approaches, grasping nothing but his cigarette carton? But I still have to applaud this counterattack against tobacco's smoky glamour. At least they're trying to raise the nicotine-dulled consciousness.

Just imagine what we could do with this idea. My favorite tobacco ad of the moment features the Virginia Slims gal. "I made a promise to bring romance back into my life, to kiss negativity goodbye, and love the dawning of each new day!" she says. Then comes the kicker. "Virginia Slims. Find Your Voice."

Find your voice? Instead of a small

warning about fetal injury in the corner, we could have a sweet little photograph of a destroyed larynx.

The Canadian blast comes at a good moment for Americans who want to think about our own antismoking messages. These days, the tobacco people are supposedly on the defensive. Cigarette taxes are rising; the number of new smokers is declining. And, most importantly, the first installments of the \$246 billion tobacco settlement are arriving in state capitals.

But it's the use of that settlement money that has me wondering about Big Tobacco's endless ability to make lemonade out of our lemons. This year the states are due to get \$6.4 billion. But the National Conference of State Legislatures recently figured that only some 8 percent of the money is earmarked for antismoking programs. A good portion is slated for what is loosely described as "health care," but much is also going into totally unrelated programs such as roads, schools, hurricane damage, sidewalks, balancing

the budget, and teenage boot camps.

No one expected all the money to go into antismoking campaigns. The Centers for Disease Control suggested 20 percent to 25 percent for prevention. But few states are meeting that goal.

To the dismay of antismoking advocates who pushed for the deal, most legislators seem to regard this settlement the same as any other pot of funds. It's found money — no strings attached. In Michigan, one of the top five smoking states in the country, for example, three-quarters of the settlement will go to college scholarships and none to fight smoking.

This is fine with the tobacco companies. Having raised the settlement money by upping the cost of cigarettes, they still get new smokers. As Matthew Myers, executive vice president of the National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids, told a reporter, "They're laughing all the way to the bank."

Indeed, they may become as successful in hooking legislators to the money as

they are in hooking kids to cigarettes. An itty-bitty clause in the settlement says that if the rate of smoking decreases, so does the payment. At what point does a state have a motive for keeping the smoking rolls up?

The point of the settlement was not just to get damages for smoking-related health problems, but to prevent new ones. We already know what works. Programs in Oregon, California, Florida and Massachusetts have had fairly dramatic effects in reducing smoking. In fact, Massachusetts' tough TV ads are aired in Canada.

But there are still a whole lot of legislators who need shock therapy to remember what's at stake. Maybe some Canadian will send them a photograph of a lung or a heart, a lip or a limp you-know-what. Did you hear what school kids up there said when they saw the mock-ups for the new packages? "Gross!" Sounds like a great name for a new cigarette.

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