

# Six Nations Band council exploring tobacco reduction strategy

By Donna Duric  
Writer

Six Nations Band Council is looking to roll out a tobacco-reduction strategy on Six Nations.

Part of that strategy takes aim at cigarette manufacturers and smoke shops on the territory in an attempt to reduce the availability of cigarettes to youth.

Ruby Miller, director of Six Nations Health Services, presented a tobacco reduction strategy to band council last Tuesday, with recommendations that included restricting access to tobacco and raising the price of cigarette products on the territory.

The recommendations came from a report on last year's Tobacco Think-Tank held in June that brought together statistics and information on cigarette smoking and its health effects on community members.

Elected Chief Bill Montour said there may be some resistance to raising cigarette prices from the reserve's tobacco industry. "They don't want by-laws," said Montour. "As soon as we start talking about controlling (tobacco) we get slammed all over the place.

"I appreciate the work you're doing," he told Miller. "How do you help us counter that group that says, 'you ain't gonna do that to us.' That's the issue."

Miller said the report has other recommendations,

mainly preventing youth from taking up the habit, that would be easier to implement than asking retailers to raise cigarette prices.

"We're not going to be able to do that because council doesn't have control over the prices of tobacco here," she said. "But there's other recommendations in here that we can use. There are some hard recommendations in there that will be difficult or impossible to implement but certainly a lot of the other things in there can become part of a tobacco strategy in the community. If we sit back and say we can't do anything then the situation just gets worse."

The report says that Six Nations people face a host of health issues at much higher rates than the non-native population in Canada and that those health issues are related to higher rates of smoking here.

Miller said if Six Nations does nothing about the high smoking rates here, "We'll have people dying much earlier. We already have people dying 10 to 15 years earlier than everybody else in Canada does."

The report was created with the help of McMaster University Hospital Dr. Sonia Anand. McMaster University partnered with Six Nations in 1998 to conduct research into health issues like heart disease and diabetes and

to make recommendations on how to reduce those diseases among Six Nations people.

Anand says according to the university's research, close to 75 per cent of people on the territory report being current or former smokers. Across Canada, the rate of smoking is 22 per cent.

Specifically, 39 per cent of Aboriginal men smoke compared to 20 per cent of non-Aboriginal Canadians and 42 per cent of Aboriginal women smoke compared to 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal women. The study did not have any statistics on how many people on Six Nations die as a direct result of smoking, but Anand drew a correlation between high smoking rates and the high rates of heart disease on Six Nations.

"Those numbers are huge," said Anand. "Six Nations people smoke much more than other people in Canada. Smoking is associated with not only heart disease and stroke but a number of cancers and chronic lung disease."

The McMaster study randomly sampled 301 adults in the community. It cited smoking as one of the number one causes of heart disease on the territory. The study noted that aboriginal people have the highest rates of heart disease in the world, compared to all other ethnic groups.

"Aboriginal people have

more fat build-up in arterial walls than non-aboriginal people," said Anand.

Anand said she was particularly concerned to find that 33 per cent of pregnant Six Nations women sampled during the study smoked during their pregnancies, compared to an off-reserve rate of less than 10 per cent.

She also noted another startling statistic: that five per cent of children aged five to 10 smoke on Six Nations. That statistic came from parents who reported that their children smoked, although the statistic does not detail for how long or how often those children smoked.

The study's recommendations focused around education and restricting access to tobacco.

"Education is definitely part of the solution of tobacco control," said Anand. "One area where the community could act early would be to restrict access to youth and minors."

She said contributing to the high prevalence of smoking in the community was the easy access and availability of tobacco to all people in the community.

"It's easy for youth and children to access tobacco," said Anand. "One potential solution is to try and restrict access to tobacco and youth under the age of 18."

The report also recom-

mended raising the price of tobacco to reduce smoking rates in the community.

"The single most important policy change that leads to reduced smoking rates is a higher price of tobacco," said Anand. "We can educate all we want, we can restrict access to kids...but the single most important feature that limits or controls tobacco use is raising the price."

She continued, "It's something I think council should discuss. The production and easy access to tobacco is limiting the life expectancy of the people of this community. Unless tobacco is controlled in some way, the health problems will continue for many generations to come."

The Six Nations tobacco industry employs about 5,000 people on the reserve, council heard. There are 116 locations on Six Nations where tobacco can be purchased.

"I know that tobacco represents a very important source of employment and revenue for the reserve and it will be a very difficult solution to...lower those rates significantly," said Anand.

Councillor Carl Hill said the Six Nations tobacco industry mostly caters to non-natives off the territory.

"They're coming here because the government is charging them an arm and a leg to buy a pack of cig-

arettes. Why would they pay \$12 a pack when they can pay \$4? It's the government's fault, then they want to turn around and blame the natives."

Although the report didn't mention any manufacturing facilities in particular, Montour said he believed it "vilified" Grand River Enterprises, Canada's largest cigarette manufacturer. GRE is a federally-licensed facility that pays almost \$200 million a year in excise taxes.

"I don't think this problem just started with GRE," said Montour. "Don't vilify the on-reserve industry. That industry employs about 5,000 people on this territory. If we didn't have it, we'd have a welfare roll of about 3,000. There's a whole bunch of other factors in place here."

Miller said, as the director of health, she has to do something about it.

"There's no instant answer. We have to do something. I've got to try anyways. There isn't one magic answer to get people to quit smoking."

Anand said the goal is "to prevent people from starting smoking in first place. It's really to prevent youth from starting that will have the greatest impact on the community's health."

Council accepted the report as information with an agreement to take a further look at the study's recommendations.