

Smoke-free air in workplace is a right

Prince George Citizen
Mon 24 Mar 2003 , p.4
By: Tracey Hohn

Dear sir:

I am an employee who has been working in the service industry for 22 years in Prince George. I notice there are misconceptions in the general public that I see reflected in the letters to the editor in our local newspapers and radio talk programs concerning workers' protection from environmental tobacco smoke. It is a misconception the province of B.C. and the authority of the Workers' Compensation Board is enough to protect the workers of this province from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke in the workplace.

Some owners/managers have made it clear they want to retain a smoking area in their establishments, while others have put community and employee health first and become non-smoking. The employee has the right to choose whether they want to enter these smoking areas. Under the current regulations, no employee is required to spend more than 20 per cent of their shift in the smoking area. Workers are still working in these rooms for much more than a maximum of 20 per cent of their shift because it is impossible to give only 20 per cent service to customers who expect 100 per cent service. It is impossible to control and regulate the rule of no more than 20 per cent of a worker's shift to be spent in a smoking area.

To complicate matters, employees who exercise their right to choose if they want to enter the smoking area experience strained relationships with their co-workers and employers. Their right to choose is not being respected or supported in some cases. Employees are feeling intimidated and have become afraid to exercise their rights of refusing to work in the smoking section/room fearing difficulties with management, customers and co-workers who choose to work in the smoking areas.

There is no known safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke. A smoking room and ventilation system is not adequate protection for workers from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke. The workers in the hospitality industry are the only portion of B.C. workers not being protected from environmental tobacco smoke.

Healthy, smoke-free air in our workplaces should be a right. I support the proposed smoking ban. This goes beyond an issue of inconvenience for smokers or a revenue issue for businesses. Protecting workers' health and preventing more smoking-related sicknesses and deaths is foremost.

Tracey Hohn

Prince George