

Good government policies can prevent many cancers

By Elizabeth May and David Swann

Statistics Canada tells us that cancer is on the brink of becoming the leading cause of death in Canada. Despite more than three decades in the “War against Cancer,” it is clear that our existing approaches have, on the whole, not been very successful.

While we, as politicians, honour the enormous commitment of researchers who devote their professional lives to seeking cures for cancer, we suggest another possibility for ending the cancer epidemic in Canada that now strikes almost half of all Canadian men, nearly 40 per cent of women, and far too many of our young adults and children.

It’s called *primary prevention*: identifying and rooting out the underlying causes of cancer. Many public health experts agree that over half of all cancers can be prevented, and it’s our belief that good government can significantly relieve the terrible burden of this disease.

Yes, smoking plays a major role in several cancers, not just lung tumors, which is why higher taxes on tobacco are a must. This *does* work: smoking rates in Canada dropped an average 2.08% per year when tobacco taxes were increasing, according to the Non-Smokers Rights Association.

Good diet is certainly another factor in preventing cancer, and it’s crucial for governments to ensure that fresh, *organic* (pesticide-free) foods are affordable for everyone, especially the most vulnerable Canadians – infants and children, pregnant women, poor and elderly people, and aboriginals, whose traditional foods are contaminated with higher levels of toxic substances than most. Can organic farming feed the world? The answer is a solid ‘yes’ according to a 2006 Worldwatch Institute survey of 200 organic farming studies.

But we must go much further than personal lifestyle factors to prevent cancer. We need to eliminate or severely restrict hundreds of chemicals that increase cancers risks and cause other serious health problems. Since the chemical and nuclear ‘revolutions’ of the 1950s, we have all been the subjects of an uncontrolled experiment in which we’re exposed to toxic substances throughout life – starting at the moment of conception.

It is seemingly impossible to assess the cause and effect of these hazards, given low doses and multiple interactions over time. But there are plenty of clues. Last week, *Cancer*, the journal of the American Cancer Society published a study identifying 216 chemicals that can induce breast cancer in animals. Of these, humans are highly exposed to 97 substances, including industrial solvents, pesticides, dyes, gasoline and diesel exhaust compounds, cosmetics ingredients, hormones, pharmaceuticals and radiation. The most recent issue of *Reproductive Toxicology* reports growing evidence that prenatal exposures impact adult-onset diseases, including cancer, heart disease and Parkinson’s.

We enthusiastically applaud the recent all-party agreement on several key recommendations to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, including improving protection of children's health and making companies responsible for the safety of their chemicals. We urge all politicians regardless of party affiliation to insist that Canada puts the precautionary principle and pollution prevention boldly into action.

Canada must learn from best practices in reducing exposure to cancer-causing substances from jurisdictions around the world. California's Proposition 65 is a good example: it requires labeling to keep substances causing cancer and birth defects out of consumer products and public water supplies. Ontario's current Bill 164 is a similar 'community right to know' initiative, well worth unanimous support, and so would a federal law requiring labeling of known and suspected carcinogens in all consumer products, including pesticides.

There is also an urgent need to address higher cancer risks faced by workers in dozens of toxic occupations. Many workplaces lack adequate baseline health assessments and surveillance practices to monitor exposures over time. All provinces need to follow British Columbia's lead requiring regulations for 'substitution' – replacing hazardous workplace substances with least toxic alternatives – in their health and safety legislation.

Canada also needs a Toxics Use Reduction Act, similar to the law in Massachusetts, which mandates research on safer alternatives and pollution prevention plans for large industries. A key feature of the new REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals) legislation in the European Union puts the onus on industry to ensure the safety of their products.

These and other good prevention initiatives are already in place in many jurisdictions around the world. Implementing them in Canada won't guarantee our high cancer rates will drop overnight. It took decades of showering our world with man-made chemical and radioactive substances to fuel the rise in cancer rates to their present intolerable levels.

We believe Canadians of all political stripes support bold action to prevent cancer, and politicians of all political stripes must take courageous action to stop cancer now.

Elizabeth May is Leader of the Green Party of Canada. Dr. David Swann, MD, is the Liberal member of Alberta's provincial parliament, representing the riding of Calgary MountainView. Both are Honorary Advisors to the national non-profit organization, Prevent Cancer Now, which is holding a national conference entitled, Cancer: It's About Prevention. It's About Time! at the University of Ottawa, May 24-27:

www.preventcancer.ca