

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

Co-founders of the *Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control* decorated by the World Health Organization

Montreal, July 8, 1999 - Heidi Rathjen and Louis Gauvin, the two co-founders of the *Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control*, have been decorated with the prestigious *Tobacco Free World Award* by the World Health Organization (WHO). “This medal is a well deserved reward for Heidi Rathjen and Louis Gauvin who are strong advocates of the tobacco reduction cause, and who have fought with great determination to pass bill 444 in June 1998, a law restricting tobacco use and promotion. This international recognition shows to what extent their contribution to improving public health is exemplary ” declared Dr. Françoise Bouchard, president of the *Association pour la santé publique du Québec*, the health association from which originates the Coalition.

The purpose of the *World Health Organization* medal is to recognize the contribution of all those who, in all regions of the world, are strong advocates for the fight against tobacco; it is also meant to motivate them to pursue their actions in the future. To receive this decoration, candidates are expected to have made significant regional public health contributions to the fight against tobacco through such activities as advocating actively, influencing policy, introducing legislation, restricting advertising, or carrying out extensive prevention campaigns. Among the 30 or so winners of 1999, there are several high-ranking politicians and prominent scientists.

In Quebec, adoption of Bill 444 on June 17, 1998, represents a great victory for the *Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control*. More specifically, Bill 444 bans the use of tobacco in workplaces and restricts it in other public areas, it also severely restricts advertising and bans sponsorships. Only two years before, it is in the midst of a severely hostile environment for tobacco control advocates that Ms. Rathjen and Mr. Gauvin launched their movement, supported by their first eight member organizations. In fact, the province of Quebec had until then been the stronghold of the tobacco industry in Canada: Quebec is the province with the highest rate of smokers, accompanied by a very permissive attitude towards tobacco; three of its four plants are stationed here; the industry spends more money in the province for

advertisement and sponsorship than any other—which contributes to its reputation in Quebec as a good corporate citizen and an indispensable contributor for the most popular festivals. In addition, Quebec workplaces had little protection from second hand smoke, and Quebec retailers had the worst rates of illegal sales to minors. Moreover, the strongest opposition to federal measures usually came from Quebec.

However, in very little time, Ms. Rathjen and Mr. Gauvin mobilized an impressive number of organizations around a common objective. Over 700 organizations adhered to the Coalition and participated in their grass roots campaigns. They persuaded the media, the public and finally the government to support comprehensive tobacco control measures. Because of their determination, Bill 444 passed unanimously before the Quebec national assembly. “Heidi Rathjen and Louis Gauvin have greatly deserved the WHO medal, but I also firmly believe that a recognition of this scale will help spread the word that a small number of dedicated people with very little money can beat the tobacco industry, even on their home turf. The two co-founders of the *Coalition* are a living proof that this can be so ” concluded Dr. Françoise Bouchard.

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