

Smokers grieving for lost pleasures

In the face of demands by the health police and their supporters for a tobacco-free New Zealand, **Sue Heap** asks how much change can a smoker take; how are life-long addicts supposed to cope without their five minutes of pleasure?

ON A clay bank beside a metal road, in front of a paddock where bad racehorses grazed unbothered, ducking in the long grass as cars — heralded by dust clouds — tossed grit and dodged potholes as they wound down the narrow hill to the wooden bridge by the crumbling workers hut where the bigger children played, along the road from the ghost tunnel made in a culvert, half a bus load of us kids took our first smoke. It tasted funny.

At high school, on horses now, we retreated to the back of the farms, looking north to the Kaipara Harbour, having purchased our 10 Pall Mall plain from the dairy several miles away, to smoke, perilously close to the full haybarn, with the rough boy on the big chestnut horse.

Later still, grieved at leaving the farm, in the crucible of the *Auckland Star* proofreading room where the foreman wouldn't open the window, everybody smoked, soon including me. Father was still on a good-natured 20 a day, and my social development marked by long hours of drinking and smoking with visitors he hoped I might like, until I shied off a suspiciously choreographed boat trip and vanished into Ponsonby, where you

could find a room for five bucks a week to breed — oh dear — out of wedlock.

During pregnancy, I abbreviated my smoking habit to three a day, and developed a horrible temper that did not abate until the daily tally returned to 15 a day.

Around this time people quite close to me did drop off from smoking. Uncle Bob always looked terrible round his eyes. Great Aunt Tilly wore her buttons too tight around her chest — her last words to me were, "I think I've lost my voice. I shall have to go to England and take voice lessons." My sister quit smoking then survived a cancer somewhere else.

I went to a hypnotist. After three days I felt all blown up and went back to Benson and Hedges.

When the price went up I changed to roll-your-owns, 15 a day.

I've always run around a lot. With some people "keeping fit" is not something they have to do between doing "real" stuff — that is, computer stuff, talking to people, selling things, buying things, facilitating. For others, physical exertion is their key to happiness, i.e. when they are tearing round or mastering something physically difficult.

Father, one of nine children, got his own toothbrush with his first pay packet, at age 13, and I was lucky to always have my own toothbrush, shoes, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, bantams and horses, and to leave school. When I was 23, I thought the financial security Father valued so much a boring alternative to taking brief jobs between long holidays on next-to-nothing.

He quit cold turkey from 20 a day. For five long years he borrowed smokes, then he stopped. He became an eloquent, vociferous curmudgeon, fired-up on whisky —

and put on four stone. My mother's brother, a good natured uncle, retained his sanguinity, but also put on four stone.

One dropped dead at 65, in his kitchen; the other at 70, cleaning his car window.

Since they both quit at 50, that birthday marked my decision to carry on, the requirement being to fill my lungs with air every day, to go up and down that pool until the last dendron gasps back to life, to tear round on my bike in the dawn. Some would call this torture, and it is torture to stop thinking and do it, but it is not the long torture of changing a lifetime habit.

The business of parliamentarians is to sit down talking all day and spend long hours on aeroplanes, often at odds with their families' needs, and they might think a heart attack is quicker and cheaper than a cancer, and the torture not so long. They are living in their heads — not fidgety kind of people — so how do they know what is good for the other kind?

How many out there who quit smoking overburden their hearts with extra weight, or live in permanent mourning for lost pleasures?

The gurus go: "They could change their eating habits of 60 years, take up exercise, stop wallowing in consumer goods, debt, repel the plenitude of disposable capitalism, take their earthly pleasures with light footsteps on the ground."

How much change can a man take? How are smokers supposed to cope?

For five brief minutes it all goes away.

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