# Your Right to Smoke? My Right to Breathe

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

## Secondhand Smoke and COPD

My recent trip to the United States was an eye-opener to how many people are smokers there. The rules regarding where you can smoke are different to Australia, where I live. While I appreciate a person's right to smoke a cigarette, what about my right to breathe?

### Why Do People Smoke?

I know I will sound like a typical ex-smoker and a little hypocritical, however I struggle with why people still smoke. Years ago we didn't have the information on the effects of smoking that we do now.

If you don't know by now that smoking is responsible for many chronic diseases, you must live under a rock. Yet we continue to smoke! Governments make money from it through taxes, and tobacco companies keep returning big profits.

The World Health Organization's statistics tell us more than 5 million people die every year directly from smoking cigarettes, with another 600, 000 dying from exposure to secondhand smoke. So why do we smoke?

My own opinion is that many of us think we're bulletproof and nothing will happen to us — that was definitely my mindset. How many times do we hear of stories about people changing their lifestyle due to being diagnosed with a chronic illness?

Yes, everything I'm saying is what I did. Then I had a stroke/seizure — doctors weren't 100 percent sure on which one it was. Needless to say I had to reevaluate my lifestyle if I wanted to live a long life, and giving up smoking was part of what had to happen.

### It's Our Right to Smoke

Of course there's always the opposing opinion that it's a person's right to smoke cigarettes. It saddens me when I see people smoke as I can visualize what's happening inside of them and how their body struggles to cope with every inhalation. However, it is legal and a person has the right to smoke.

My problem is why should my health be affected by someone else's poor lifestyle choice? Surely a smoker is responsible for where they smoke and who is being affected by their choice? With so many people dying and being affected by secondhand smoke, I can only assume that someone who lights up around non-smokers is clueless to the impact it can have.

Yes, you have the right to smoke, but you shouldn't have the right to negatively affect someone else by doing so. Wow, now I really do sound like an ex-smoker!

## Cigarette Smoke

One of the challenges we have as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) patients is avoiding triggers that cause an exacerbation. Probably one of the hardest triggers I find to avoid is cigarette smoke. Like most non-smokers I can sniff out cigarette smoke from some distance, and once that smoke enters my airways the effects are almost immediate.

While I was a smoker on and off for well over 20 years, it's as a non-smoker I have come to realize the effects smoking has on non-smokers. So-called smoking areas in public venues are of little use as their effectiveness depends largely on which way the wind blows.

My New Year's Eve celebrations were cut short recently due to the smoking area of the restaurant I was at being located in an inappropriate area. As the breeze picked up during the night, cigarette smoke was directed straight through the restaurant. In the nearly five years since I was diagnosed this is the second time it’s happened.

*Next page: how to avoid cigarette smoke.*

## Cigarette Smoke

I found avoiding cigarette smoke in the U.S. quite a challenge as it seemed there were few regulations in regards to were someone could smoke in public. In fact, while at the start line of the New York marathon I was shocked to see a fellow competitor light up a cigarette among the other runners. Surely a start line of a marathon should be a smoke-free zone?

## The Effects of Smoking

Take three minutes to watch this video. If you still think I’m sounding like a typical ex-smoker who is being dramatic than consider this. Smoking can cause:

- Lung cancer
- COPD
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Asthma
- Reproductive effects in women
- Premature, low birth-weight babies
- Diabetes
- Blindness, cataracts and age-related macular degeneration

Add to this the fact that smokers often have bad breath, bad teeth and smell of stale cigarette smoke you have to ask: why smoke?

## Avoiding Cigarette Smoke

As I said earlier, as COPD patients we need to avoid cigarette smoke and have strategies to help us accomplish this. We can simply say we need to avoid areas where people smoke, but that’s a little simplistic for me.

Do some research on your local area; find out if there are shops, restaurants and other venues you may frequent that are smoke-free. It also pays to know the smoking habits of your neighbors so you don’t have smoke wafting through your windows and causing you grief.

Your workplace can be another source of contamination, as most workplaces will have designated smoking area. Make sure your employer is aware of your requirements, as a poorly thought out smoking area can affect your

health and productivity. These days most employers are required by law to ensure a safe and healthy work environment.

Likewise, if you're traveling to another part of the country or a different country, find out their smoking laws. There will be differences in other countries and it's important to know what they are. Without doubt the most stupid place I have seen a smoking area was the entry to the respiratory clinic, where I had my lung function test.

Unfortunately, we live in a time where businesses of all types don't take into account the needs of people with respiratory disease.

On our recent trip to the U.S. we spent four days in Las Vegas as we'd never been there. I knew that smoking was allowed pretty much anywhere in the casino areas, but what I didn't realize was we had to go through these areas to get into our room. I won't be in any hurry to go back there, mainly due to constantly smell of stale cigarettes and being constantly breathless.

It seems strange to me that so many respiratory conferences are held in Las Vegas given the fact that smoking contributes so much to lung disease. I guess when smoking is so common in some countries the location doesn't make a lot of difference.

The reality is smoking is going to be with us for many years because legislators won't change laws out of fear that come election time their decisions will mean less votes. Maybe it's time we formed an international respiratory political party to bring about change.