

Smoke bans may spread as drawbacks fail to eventuate

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ANTI-TOBACCO groups have called for smokers to butt out in alfresco dining areas and beer gardens that serve food, with research showing a sharp rise in people going to the pub since strict bans began last year.

New data from Cancer Council Victoria shows a 9% rise in hotel patronage since July last year, when smoking was banned inside all pubs and nightclubs.

And the growing popularity of smoke-free pubs has been confirmed by the Australian Hotels Association.

More than 80% of the 1250 respondents to the survey — which included current and former smokers — said the ban had not made any difference.

Quit executive director Fiona Sharkie said the research proved smoking bans were good for business, despite scaremongering by the tobacco and hospitality industries.

"The sky has not fallen in because you cannot smoke in bars and clubs," she said. "More people are going to these venues and socialising without exposure to second-hand smoke."

Anti-tobacco groups now want the ban extended to beer gardens, balconies and street-front tables where food is served. Queensland has already banned smoking in outdoor eating areas, as have several NSW councils.

"Anyone who wants to dine outside has to endure a side serve of passive smoking, and the overwhelming feedback from the public is that they would like that situation changed urgently," Ms Sharkie said.

Despite bleak warnings that last year's tobacco bans would destroy Victoria's pub culture, the hotel industry has adapted and prospered, according to the AHA's general manager of public affairs, Paddy O'Sullivan.

"We are not surprised by the Cancer Council findings at all," he said. "Many Victorian hotels have worked hard to create an atmosphere that is more conducive for families and other patrons put off by tobacco smoke."

But Mr O'Sullivan rejected any plan to extend tobacco bans outside. "We believe that no further restrictions are warranted," he said.

A spokesman for Health Minister Daniel Andrews said the Government was about to announce its new Tobacco Control Strategy, and would talk to affected groups.

The proposal received a mixed response from pub and cafe owners yesterday. The owner of Prahran's Flying Duck Hotel, Michael Flanagan, said a ban would be disastrous for many venues, some of which had recently spent up to \$200,000 on beer gardens, balconies and roof-top terraces.

"Having recently purchased this business on the basis that it had a large beer garden to accommodate smokers, any further ban would certainly have a detrimental effect," he said.

"We have 150 seats inside for those that don't want to smoke. Unfortunately, smoking is synonymous with having a drink, and that's the way the industry is."

Mario Maccarone, the owner of the Brunswick Street cafe Mario's, said outdoor bans would be difficult to enforce.

"If people aren't able to smoke at the tables, they will probably stand and smoke, or move down the street a few metres," he said. "I hate blanket rules in many respects, but there is a reasonable amount of people who want to eat without being surrounded by smokers."

Cameron Houston