

Smoke in our eyes

By **Dominic Standish**
Special to Italy Daily

It appears that the government made a New Year's resolution to clear smokers from public places.

Since Jan. 1, people who smoke in public buildings or transport where No Smoking—*vietato fumare*—signs are displayed risk fines from €25 to €250. These fines can be doubled for offenders who smoke in the presence of a visibly pregnant woman or child under 12 years old in public access buildings, including bars and restaurants.

Failure to display a no smoking sign can result in a fine of €200 to €2,000 for the person responsible. A recent wave of police spot checks on public places has led to hundreds of fines.

According to laws in 1975 and 1995, public buildings where smoking is forbidden include closed cinemas, theaters, museums, libraries, banks and many parts of universities and schools such as corridors and bathrooms.

In addition, a law has been drafted that will give all workplaces six months to install ventilation systems that guarantee 80 cubic meters of clean air per person per hour. If this law is passed, as is widely predicted, businesses and smokers that fail to comply will face heavy fines.

Restaurants or bars will not be able to avoid compliance with designated non-smoking and smoking areas, which are also subject to the clean air specifications.

These restrictions on smokers follow an international pattern led by the city of Los Angeles, which has banned smoking in all bars and restaurants. They especial-

ly focus on the risks of passive smoking. "We are very serious about this because we all know that passive smoking is extremely harmful," Health Minister Girolamo Sirchia, said when announcing the new fines in January.

In Italy, there are 15 million passive smokers, according to the Health Ministry. While the links between lung cancer and smoking have been well established, there is little consensus about the connections between passive smoking and lung cancer.

The results of a seven-year study of 650 lung-cancer patients commissioned by the World Health Organization found, according to *The Economist*, that "non-smokers married to, working with or growing up with smokers were not at significantly more risk from lung cancer than anyone else."

However, the *British Medical Journal* rejected the WHO findings.

Research by Professor Robert Nilsson revealed that the increase in the incidence of lung cancer attributed to passive smoking is one order of magnitude lower than that used to justify regulating environmental risks in the U.S. So passive smoking poses less of a risk than natural arsenic in water or eating mushrooms twice a week.

The lack of hard evidence linking passive smoking and lung cancer raises questions about the government's restrictions on smoking and the potential costs to organizations.

There are inevitable problems with implementation. Do pregnant women who decide to smoke in a public building face a double fine?

The battle lines between smokers and

non-smokers have been drawn and the arguments have begun. But with smokers claiming to be the victims of others telling them what to do and non-smokers complaining about passive smoking, they need to be redrawn.

Despite being a non-smoker with smoke-sensitive eyes, I am strongly opposed to the new restrictions on smokers. With an absence of concrete evidence connecting passive smoking and lung cancer, the government is playing on fears of a link and is interfering in our lives.

I find it unpleasant to eat in smoke-filled restaurants, especially as my wife and I take our 19-month-old son to eat out at least once a week. But, like most people, I am perfectly capable of finding non-smoking areas or asking people near me not to smoke.

Sirchia urged any Italian facing the threat of passive smoking to "call the police."

But we are not so pathetic that we need the intervention of the new Carabinieri della Salute to rescue us by fining smokers and restaurant owners.

Increased policing with the new smoking laws only reduces the personal freedom of smokers and non-smokers. And who knows what the next assignment for the health police will be?

Smoke in our eyes about the dangers of passive smoking should not prevent us from making our own decisions about our health and how to conduct personal relations.

Mr. Standish runs Veneto-based Progress Consulting. Comments to him can be addressed to dstandish@europa.com.