

Energy drinks' effect on young troubles doctors

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Doctors in Prince Edward Island will vote Saturday on whether to push for a ban on minors buying caffeinated energy drinks.

The province's medical society is tackling the issue amid growing concern among some educators and parents on the island. One high school will prohibit the drinks as of Monday and the province's assistant chief medical officer has indicated he's in favour of restrictions.

"These beverages, with the addiction potential and the health effects they can cause, they need to be regulated," said William Scantlebury, a family physician in Charlottetown and president of the medical society. "Young people are more vulnerable to the promotion of the product and they don't care yet about their health, they're too young."

He thinks the motion is likely to pass and said doctors will then devise a plan that will include lobbying for age-related restrictions on the drinks.

"It's similar to cigarettes and tobacco, they're out there, but they're not easy to buy," Dr. Scantlebury said. "We don't think they should be in the grocery store, where a child can buy them and they're not ID'd."

And the principal of Souris Regional High School, at the eastern end of the island, said there was no reason for delay.

"Starting Monday, we are banning them at our school," said Seana Evans-Renaud, who added that school officials already have been cracking down. "We saw one student who was walking around with one and we said, 'You have energy enough for all of us without this,' so we confiscated it."

She is worried about caffeinated energy drinks, which became available in May when the province began allowing beverages to be sold in cans, because she sees young people drinking far more than the recommended amount. She also fears there hasn't been enough research on the beverages' long-term effects.

Educators are not alone in their concern. Fourteen-year-old island resident Samm Robbins of Stratford has nothing against casual consumption of the drinks but worries sometimes that her peers at Stonepark Intermediate School in Charlottetown are drinking too many of them.

"When they go off at lunchtime they buy energy drinks and they say it helps them stay awake in class," she said. "The kids get really hyper and they just don't stop."

One of the most prominent products in this market is Red Bull, which has about the same amount of caffeine as a similarly sized cup of coffee, far less than some of its competitors. A public-relations employee for the company's Canadian subsidiary

asked for questions to be e-mailed and then did not respond to subsequent messages.

Ms. Evans-Renaud said the onus is on manufacturers.

"Prove to me that it's safe," she said. "[We shouldn't] wait to find out if it's not before taking a stand on it."

Health Canada warns against overconsumption of caffeinated energy drinks and advises against mixing them with alcohol. They say adverse effects have included electrolyte disturbances, nausea and heart irregularities.

Several PEI parents said the popularity of the drinks seems to have dropped since the initial buzz in the spring. Clerks at a number of convenience stores said they'd seen much the same pattern.

But some parents are still concerned. One with a daughter at Ms. Evans-Renaud's school, however, was dubious about how effective the ban would be.

"They're not allowed to have cellphones but the kids sneak them in," Kelly Wilson said. "I think kids will do the same with these drinks."