

\$5,000 fine for smoking mooted

By Marnie O'Neill

COUNCIL on Smoking and Health chairman Ronald Leung wants to make it a criminal offence for teenagers to smoke.

The idea was criticised as being "draconian" by Health and Welfare Branch principal assistant secretary Derek Gould.

The last government smoking statistics were for 1990 and showed a decrease in the overall number of smokers, from 26 per cent to 17 per cent in 1989.

But the number of teenage girl smokers almost tripled.

Laws to be introduced to the Legislative Council early next year will ban the sale of tobacco products to under-18s.

Leung said legislation should be taken a step further to make teenage smoking a crime, punishable with a \$5,000 fine.

Gould said such a law would only drive teenage smoking underground.

"There are many reasons why people smoke, not just because of tobacco advertising but because it's all part of the culture," he said.

"I believe public education is much more effective than legislation, because if you tell teenagers not to do something, it usually has the opposite effect."

"You shouldn't punish people who are under-18 and smoke, because they are the victims.

"People who sell tobacco products to minors are the ones who should be punished, in the same way drug dealers are."

Legislator Fung Chi-wood also disagreed with Leung's proposal, saying anti-smoking education was by far the most effective deterrent.

"I think his proposal is a bit radical and would not be acceptable to most legislators," he said.

"The way forward is to educate youngsters that smoking is hazardous to their health and to the health of others."

Gould said the number of teenage girl smokers had soared from 0.4 per cent in 1982 to 1.1 per cent in 1990.

He said the figures were disturbing and baffling, because they contradicted overall statistics showing smoking in general was declining in Hongkong.

Gould said he could only speculate on why more teenage girls than ever before were smoking, as there had been no recent studies on the reasons teenagers turned to nicotine.

"There could be a number of possible factors. I don't believe advertising is entirely to blame," he said.