



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### Scents and sensibility

By WALLACE IMMEN  
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*Is it time for you to flush your toilet water and swear off wearing scents at work? It isn't just that some people don't like the smells of the perfumes, colognes, body sprays and grooming products used by co-workers. Chemicals in the fragrances can trigger reactions ranging from headaches to heart palpitations in people who are sensitive to them, making it difficult for them to work effectively. While there are no Canadian laws regulating the wearing of fragrances in the workplace, a recent U.S. court ruling has put the issue back in the limelight. And a growing number of workplaces are voluntarily going scent-free. Should your workplace be next?*

In a high-profile U.S. case last month, a federal court upheld an employee's right to a scent-free workplace.

Detroit city planner Susan McBride filed a lawsuit complaining that a co-worker's perfume made it challenging for her to breathe and do her job. The city initially fought it on the grounds there was no medical diagnosis of her condition and she was still able to do her job.

But the U.S. District Court sided with Ms. McBride. The city of Detroit was ordered to make three of its office buildings scent-free, and Ms. McBride was awarded \$100,000 (U.S.).

#### LACKING LAWS

So far in Canada, no one has gone to such legal lengths to force employers to ban fragrances. In fact, there are no Canadian laws regulating the issue of scent sensitivity in the workplace.

Nevertheless, employers have an obligation under all provincial health and safety codes to provide a safe workplace, and scents are increasingly being considered a health and safety issue, says Jan Chappel, senior technical specialist for the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety in Hamilton.

Environmental sensitivity is listed as a disability in Ontario's Human Rights Code, which means that employers have a duty to accommodate the needs of the environmentally sensitive in the workplace.

However the rule doesn't specifically address scent sensitivities as a disability, says Pascale Demers, spokesperson for the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

The commission has only ever received two complaints from employees about scent sensitivity. Both were settled privately, and the commission has no information about what was decided, Ms. Demers says.

A growing number of companies are responding to employee requests and have set up policies that ask workers to voluntarily go scent-free, says Nancy Bradshaw, co-ordinator of the environmental health clinic of Women's College Hospital in Toronto.

Ms. Chappel estimates that up to a third of Canadian workplaces have some form of restriction on scents worn by employees. Precise figures are not available because companies are not required to report their policies.

Why not more?

"Because only some employees are sensitive to scents, and the causes and reactions are different to pin down, employers have tended to think of scent sensitivities as an issue that can be worked out with informal agreements among employees," Ms. Bradshaw says.

"But there is a growing awareness that more formal polices are needed because people may not complain, even though they have chemical sensitivities serious enough to affect their ability to put in a day's work," she says.

Over the past three years, she has given presentations at about 50 Ontario workplaces about the advantages of setting up scent-free policies; about half of them have taken action.

"Employers are swayed by the promise that going scent-free could raise productivity," Ms. Bradshaw says.

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## SNIFFING OUT THE PROBLEM

"Why some fragrances affect some people but not others remains a mystery," says Dr. Michael Joffres, a professor of health sciences at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

Scents contain chemicals that, even in low amounts, can trigger reactions in some sensitive individuals, he explains.

"Scent sensitivity is like an allergy. Over time, people exposed to the chemicals in fragrances become increasingly sensitized to them to the point that they can no longer tolerate any more exposure. This can trigger breathing problems, headaches, sneezing, nausea, disorientation and, in extreme cases, they can go into shock similar to the reaction those with a peanut allergy might have," Dr. Joffres says.

"We do not know exactly how these reactions are triggered and there is no commonly accepted medical diagnosis of environmental sensitivities," he adds.

"No matter what the explanation is, these people are falling through the cracks of the current medical system."

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## TAKING ACTION

### TWO EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES

Jennifer Chase had just started a new job when she noticed something in the office was making her sick. "I regularly developed a dry, sore throat. I'd start to cough and couldn't stop. My eyes were watering and I'd get a debilitating headache. I had trouble seeing my computer because my vision was blurry and I couldn't concentrate on my work," recalls Ms. Chase, 27, a marketer for The Leprosy Mission Canada in Richmond Hill, Ont.

She quickly realized her reactions were due to co-workers who wore strong scents to work.

So she decided to ask her supervisor to set a scent-free office policy. Worried as a new employee she'd be taken the wrong way, "I said: It's not that I don't like their perfume or fragrance-wearers as people, it's because the scents make me sick. This is actually a health issue and it is affecting my work."

When a scent ban was discussed at the next staff meeting, she wasn't alone: Four of the office's 25 other employees said they were also having reactions to fragrances. .

A no-scent policy went into effect in 2007. It reads: "Due to scent allergies in some staff members, please refrain from using scented body products when you are in the office. Given the prevalence of this type of allergy in the general population, it is prudent to refrain from using strongly scented products when representing the Mission outside of the office as well."

Co-workers who once wore fragrances have no problems complying.

Overall, "people are happy with the policy," Ms. Chase says "Being open and candid about my allergy has helped people put a face on the issue," she says.

Roberta Bradley works from home in Edmonton. She has to: The scents from any employees wearing fragrances make her "start to feel like I've had way too much to drink and get sick and unable to focus on things. It's just horrible."

Four years ago, Ms. Bradley was working as a computer programmer in the Calgary office of Alberta Education, the provincial government's education ministry, when she realized she had a problem. Several co-workers wore strong fragrances and, within minutes of starting work each day, she started to feel the effects. It took six months of visits to several doctors before she was diagnosed with a sensitivity to the perfume, cologne and fragrance in hair-care products used by co-workers. "I went to my boss and said, 'I can't work in this building. Either you have to let me work from home or you have to let me go.' "

For the past three years, she's been home-based, during which she also became vice-president of the non-profit Environmental Health Association of Alberta.

In that role, she meets many people who suffer even worse reactions to workplace scents and continue to struggle through their office jobs each day.

Her organization is now lobbying for all workplaces in the province to become scent-free and she admits it hasn't been easy. Her own employer did not institute a scent-free policy. "It's a matter of perception, the same way it was a few years ago with smoking. Many employers and employees still feel that a person who wants to wear perfume has the right to do so," she says.

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## WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

2.4

Percentage of Canadian population that has physical symptoms when exposed to chemicals in the air.

15

Percentage of population estimated to have some kind of breathing problem affected by chemicals in scented products.

17

Percentage of Canadians who suffer from migraine headaches, which can be triggered by scents.

\$247.1-million

Value of imported perfumes sold in Canada in 2008.

\$2.48-billion

U.S. sales of men's and women's fragrances in 2009, down 10 per cent from 2008.

4,000

Number of different chemicals that may be used in the making of fragrances.

80

Percentage of chemical ingredients in scented products that have never been tested for their toxicity in humans.

*Sources: Nova Scotia Allergy and Environmental Health Association, Canadian Lung Association, Statistics Canada; The NPD Group Inc.*

## SETTING LIMITS

**Here are tips for setting up a scent-free policy from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety:**

**Organize:** Form a committee, including employees, unions and management.

**Start from the top:** Get management commitment for action.

**Get input:** Conduct a survey of all employees asking about concerns and suggestions for limits on scents.

**Explain the reasons:** In writing and discussions, managers should lay out that the policy is being adopted for health reasons and not just because of dislike of some fragrances.

**Make it universal:** A policy should apply to visitors as well.

**Have open debate:** Listen to employee concerns and discuss actions they will have to take to make the policy effective.

**Inform everyone:** Distribute the resulting policy and provide an interim period before it takes effect, to give employees time to adjust their habits.

**Post reminders:** Notices should include public signs and website messages.

## BEING SENSITIVE

**If you choose to wear scents, less is more, says Toronto-based etiquette coach Louise Armstrong. Her tips:**

**Keep it subtle:** If someone tells you that you're wearing too much fragrance, you are. Our ability to smell our own scents is diminished even while they might be screaming out to those around us.

**Apply it in private:** Like all aspects of human personal grooming, perfume application shouldn't be a spectator sport.

**Use the two-foot rule:** Your signature scent shouldn't waft beyond the confines of your desk. If someone says from across the room, "Hey, isn't that Escape?" you've overdone it.

**Don't in close quarters:** A scent will be distracting in meetings, interviews, training or travelling. **Refrain from reapplying:** One spritz in the morning should be sufficient.

The weekly Web poll

Survey says...

Does your employer restrict perfumes or fragrances in your workplace?

60 Percentage who said no

40 Percentage who said yes

Source: Globe and Mail online poll; 7,696 respondents



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