

Judge awards billions to Quebec smokers

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Lise Blais, whose husband Jean-Yves Blais, who died from lung cancer which developed from smoking, makes a statement as Mario Bujold, executive director of the Quebec Tobacco and Health Council listens during a news conference Monday, June 1, 2015, in Montreal. A judge has awarded more than \$15 billion Canadian (US\$12 billion) to Quebec smokers in a case that pitted them against three giant tobacco companies. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP)

A judge has awarded more than \$15 billion Canadian (US\$12 billion) to Quebec smokers in a case that pitted them against three giant tobacco companies. The case is believed to be the biggest class-action lawsuit

ever seen in Canada.

Superior Court Justice Brian Riordan said in his decision released late Monday that by choosing not to inform [health authorities](#) or the public directly of what they knew, the companies chose profits over the health of their customers.

The [judgment](#) calls on the companies to issue initial compensation of more than \$1 billion Canadian (US\$800 million) in the next 60 days, regardless of whether they elect to appeal. The [judge](#) will decide at a later date how to distribute those funds.

JTI-Macdonald, Imperial Tobacco and Rothmans, Benson & Hedges said they will appeal.

The Quebec case marked the first time [tobacco companies](#) had gone to trial in a civil lawsuit in Canada and involved two separate groups of plaintiffs: some of whom became seriously ill from smoking and others who said they couldn't quit.

Riordan denounced the firms' actions.

"The companies earned billions of dollars at the expense of the lungs, the throats and the general well-being of their customers," he wrote. "If the companies are allowed to walk away unscathed now, what would be the message to other industries that today or tomorrow find themselves in a similar moral conflict?"

More than 1 million Quebecers were represented and argued the companies were liable because they knew they were putting out a harmful product and hid the health effects of tobacco.

Lise Blais, who lost her husband Jean-Yves Blais in 2012 to lung cancer,

said she waited for a ruling for 17 years. Her husband had tried to quit five or six times in 14 years but couldn't.

The industry argued people knew about the risks of smoking and that the products were sold legally and with federal government approval and strict regulation.

"These cases are far from over," RBH spokeswoman Anne Edwards said in a statement. "We will vigorously appeal this lower court's judgment."

JTI-Macdonald said Canadians have been well aware of the health risks since the 1950s and health warnings have been on packages for more than 40 years.

The three firms will split the payout according to responsibility set out by the court—67 percent will fall to Imperial Tobacco, 20 percent to Rothmans, Benson & Hedges, and 13 percent to JTI-Macdonald.

"These three companies lied to their customers for 50 years and hurt their right to life," Andre Lesperance, one of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs, said Monday. "It's a great victory for victims as well as for society in general."

The trial stemmed from two cases that were originally filed separately in 1998 before being certified and consolidated in 2005. The case began sitting in 2012.

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