The first stage of the Northern Territory’s most significant public health initiative in more than a decade will coming into force tomorrow.

The Minister for Health and Community Services, Jane Aagaard, says the introduction of the new Tobacco Control Act on 1 January 2003 will provide smokers with a good reason to quit for the New Year.

"It could be a very healthy New Year’s resolution for a lot of people," Mrs Aagaard said.

"These new laws will finally bring the Territory into line with the rest of Australia, and will hopefully mark the end of us recording the highest smoking rate in the country."

Mrs Aagaard said the new laws are a clear response to growing public demand for smoke-free areas, to protect patrons against the risk of passive smoke inhalation or Environmental Tobacco Smoke.

Mrs Aagaard said the first stage of the new laws will see smoking prohibited in the following areas from tomorrow:

- All indoor restaurants, cafes, eateries and shopping centres
- Halls and community facilities such as libraries, theatres and galleries
- Confined areas of common access such as stairways, corridors, lobbies, waiting and ticketing areas, toilets and staff amenities in public buildings
- Public transport such as taxis, buses, vessels and their stations and waiting areas
- The buildings and grounds of schools and childcare facilities (except where staff agree, designating an outdoor area smoking area concealed from the view of children and restricted to adults)
- Shared accommodation areas such as hostels and nursing homes except where rooms are shared by couples
- Within two metres of entrances to buildings and three metres of air conditioning inlets
- Venues with fixed seating such as sports stadiums will be required to provide 50% of their seating as non-smoking

"These changes are long overdue," Mrs Aagaard said.

"One in five Territorians die of smoking related illness, with the latest figures show 27.9% of Territorians over the age of 14 smoke compared to the national average of 22.5%.

"The new laws have already gained widespread support and the experience elsewhere in Australia has shown that smoking restrictions can be introduced with minimum disruption."

Lend Lease – managers of Darwin’s main shopping centre, Casuarina
Square – made the pro-active decision to prohibited smoking through the entire centre more than a year ago.

Mrs Aagaard said further smoking bans on hotels, clubs and casinos will take effect from from 31 May 2003 - World No Tobacco Day.

Anyone who has made the decision to stop smoking and is in need of assistance, is urged to contact the Quitline on 131 848.