

Days in halls of power

Young envisage smokefree New Zealand

By Lindy Laird

A Whangarei student helped present an anti-tobacco submission to the Parliamentary Health Select Committee in Wellington last week.

Whangarei Boys' High School student Yathen Jayaweera, describes his role as one of the country's six Smokefree Youth ambassadors — and the only one from Northland — as a privilege.

A day after his visit to the Beehive, the 15-year-old was articulate and enthused about his day in the halls of power and the cause that took him there.

"I've never been to the Beehive before. It's one thing to see it but to be invited to speak there, that was an honour," Yathen said.

"The select committee loved our speeches and submission."

Yathen has recently become a Smokefree Youth ambassador, encouraged by the school's science and health department head Roz O'Shea.

"It's the greatest experience you can have, helping people live

healthy lives," he said.

"As a new generation, we have to follow our own path. We hope to just chip away until real change happens.

"We're lucky in New Zealand. We've been educated and can make a difference because of our knowledge. I haven't grown up around parents who smoke. Others are not so lucky and in some way the decision to smoke was never really their own. You just get the impression it doesn't

have to be like that.

"There is a decrease in the number of people smoking but not as much as we'd like. The last thing we want to see because of anti-smoking campaigns is teen rebellion and a black market.

"We need attitudes to change first — make smoking intolerable first, then illegal. We envisage a New Zealand that is eventually smokefree. It will take a long time but there is no time limit."

The 11-MP committee is chaired by Sue Kedgley who, after the meeting, told the Cancer Society its Smoke-free Youth Ambassadors were brilliant.

Belinda Hughes, the society's

tobacco control adviser said, "In fact, the chair said it was the best submission she'd ever heard balancing facts and emotion."



□ Yathen Jayaweera, who, at 15, has already spoken at Government level on behalf of Northland youth.
— PICTURE / Lindy Laird