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Durrants

Academic quizzes smoking ban delay

By **Seann Graham**
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A LEADING academic has described demarcated smoking areas in bars as the equivalent of "having a urinating area in a swimming pool".

Professor Martin McKee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine also questioned delays by NIO health minister Shaun Woodward in introducing laws banning smoking in public places.

A spokesman for the Department of Health has confirmed that a definitive announcement will be made before the end of October.

Three months ago, Mr Woodward pledged that at a partial smoking ban at the very least would be green-lighted, but added that the decision would be based "on economic considerations".

Referring to overwhelming public support for an all-out prohibition, Prof McKee - who grew up in Belfast - said the prospect of a partial ban "has been greeted with widespread incredulity".

"Smoking kills about 3,000 people in Northern Ireland every year, nearly as many as died in all the years of the Troubles. Mr Woodward's decision flew in the face of a widespread consultation, in which 91 per cent of 70,000 respondents supported a complete ban," he said.

"The minister may have tactical reasons for delaying the introduction of a compre-

hensive ban that he has not shared with the rest of Northern Ireland.

"But given the support and the weight of scientific evidence in its favour, one can only hope it's a very temporary delay.

"When I was a child growing up in Belfast I remember the signs prohibiting spitting on Belfast buses. This has gone and in time there will be no need for similar signs saying no smoking."

Members of the Federation of Retail Licensed Trade have been the most outspoken opponents of smoke-free legislation, insisting it could adversely affect bar and restaurants business and lead to increased unemployment.

Prof McKee dismissed this argument as "nonsense".

"In New York, in the nine months after the smoking ban was introduced, sales tax receipts on food and drink increased by 12 per cent and the hospitality industry took on thousands of new employees," he said.

"In the Republic there has been a long-term downward trend in pub sales that predates the ban, but in the months after smoking was banned, the percentage of the Irish people who had visited a pub in the preceding weeks increased.

"The industry also suggests having demarcated smoking areas. Given the evidence about the limitations of ventilation, as many commentators have noted, this is the equivalent of having a urinating area in a swimming pool."

