



Posted on Tue, May. 29, 2007

Deaths are reason to control tobacco

Every year in the United States, 440,000 Americans die from smoking-related illnesses. Another 50,000 people die from inhaling secondhand smoke.

In fact, tobacco kills more Americans annually than AIDS, alcohol, cocaine, heroin, homicides, suicides, car accidents and fires combined, with annual health care costs of \$89 billion, according to a major new report from the Institute of Medicine.

That's a national epidemic of staggering proportions -- but one that can be brought under control, if state and federal lawmakers heed the institute's call to action.

"Cigarettes are one of the most dangerous consumer products ever marketed," said Richard J. Bonnie, one of the authors of the report. The goal, he said, should be to "reduce tobacco use so substantially that it is no longer a significant public health problem."

That's achievable, the report argues. All that's lacking is the political will.

Among the report's recommendations:

- Give the Food and Drug Administration oversight of tobacco products, with the power to regulate the sales, marketing and ingredients.
- Reduce the nicotine content of cigarettes, which critics say has been manipulated by the tobacco industry to create more addicts.
- Require all health insurance plans, including Medicaid and Medicare, to fund smoking-cessation programs.
- Raise state cigarette taxes as much as \$2 a pack.
- Ban smoking from most nonresidential indoor places.

The report could lend support to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' 2004 proposal to raise state tobacco taxes by 50 cents, to \$1.29 a pack, to help cover the state's uninsured. Her plan went nowhere in the Legislature, but Sebelius recently said she might push the tax hike again next year.

Last week, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found a huge increase in the number of households going smoke-free: About 72 percent of households had no-smoking rules in 2003, compared with 43 percent in 1992-93.

That's a welcome sign that public awareness about the dangers of secondhand smoke is rising, thanks in part to efforts such as the Kansas Health Foundation's "Take It Outside" campaign.

It's becoming more difficult to ignore the risks. According to a U.S. surgeon general's report last year, nearly 60 percent of kids ages 3 to 11, or about 22 million children, are exposed to secondhand smoke, often in their homes. There is no safe level of smoke, that report noted.

The public debate on tobacco is changing, with the clearer understanding that tobacco is a public health scourge and preventable cause of illness. Health experts now have given lawmakers a clear blueprint for how to reduce those health costs.

For the editorial board, Randy Scholfield

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