

Salisbury Post

Column: Raising tobacco tax could help cut related health risks

By Dr. Trevor Allison and Dr. Jim Cowan, Salisbury Post

For those of us working to improve the health of infants, children, youth, and pregnant women, the passage into law of our state's \$14.8 billion state budget plan for fiscal year 2004 was bittersweet. On the one hand, despite facing continued and unprecedented budget shortfalls, Governor Mike Easley and the N.C. General Assembly avoided deep cuts in many programs serving our families. Regrettably, however, the budget did not raise the tax on tobacco that would have benefited our families as well.

The document, "Reducing Tobacco Use: A Report of the Surgeon General," states that "raising tobacco prices is good public health policy and further, raising tobacco excise taxes is widely regarded as one of the most effective tobacco prevention and control strategies." The National Academy of Sciences goes further by declaring that increased taxation on tobacco is the most effective way to deter youth from the addiction of cigarettes, spit and chew tobacco, cigars and the like. We could not agree more. Less tobacco consumption translates to lives saved and economic costs reduced. The National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids states that raising our state's cigarette tax by 75 cents per pack would prevent 105,750 North Carolina children from starting to smoke and this, in turn, would protect 33,750 children who are alive today from smoking-caused death. Tobacco use, particularly cigarette smoking, remains the leading cause of preventable illness and death in the United States. Over 440,000 people die from tobacco related disease each year. Annually, the costs of tobacco consumption in North Carolina are over \$4.75 billion.

Research affirms time and time again that increasing tobacco taxes is particularly effective in deterring the initiation of tobacco use and helping current users to quit. This is especially true among our most vulnerable populations including youth and pregnant women. A report produced by the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Lung Association and others state that among youth, a 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes decreases smoking prevalence by about 7 percent. Studies show that increasing the cost of cigarettes by 10 percent reduces smoking rates among pregnant women by 5-7 percent.

Children and pregnant women have the most to gain by abstaining from tobacco. The earlier individuals start to smoke, the harder it is to quit later, and the more likely they will die prematurely. The average age people start smoking is 13 years and 60 percent of adult smokers report that they began using cigarettes before their 14th birthday; 80 percent by age 18. Compounding the costs of youth tobacco use is tobacco's role as a "gateway" drug to illicit substance abuse. A recent publication from the National Institute on Drug Abuse describes the growing mountain of evidence about the association between tobacco consumption among young people with subsequent use of marijuana and the later use of other illegal drugs such as cocaine and hallucinogens. With respect to pregnant women, those who smoke not only jeopardize their lives, but also the life of the unborn. Dr. Cathy Melvin, Chair of the National Partnership to Help Pregnant Smokers Quit, reports that smoking during pregnancy is the single largest preventable cause of premature birth and low birthweight babies; leading risk factors for babies dying before their first birthday.

Because state tax increases are more effective in reducing tobacco consumption when combined with robust tobacco prevention and control efforts, a portion of revenues

generated from a tax on tobacco should be used for tobacco prevention and cessation programs, counter-advertising campaigns and aggressive enforcement of limits on youth access to tobacco including internet sales. To significantly reduce tobacco use, the Centers for Disease Control recommends that between \$43 million and \$119 million should be spent in North Carolina each year to implement tobacco control programs that are comprehensive, sustainable and accountable. Presently, \$9.4 million, only a fraction of what is needed, is directed toward this effort. Revenues should also be applied to cover healthcare costs for tobacco-related disease among the indigent. Consider this. During the past five years, Rowan County Medicaid costs have almost doubled, from \$3.4 million in fiscal year 1999 to close to well over \$6 million in fiscal year 2003. Illnesses resulting from an addiction to tobacco contribute, in large extent, to this escalating medical expense and suffering among the poor and needy.

The N.C. Alliance for Health, a statewide coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to reducing tobacco consumption for the purpose of creating healthier lives for all North Carolinians, calls for increasing our state's cigarette excise tax by at least 75 cents per pack. Locally, Health Link of Rowan County affirms the NC Alliance for Health's position. To measurably improve the lives of our babies, children and youth, we encourage members in our community to advocate for significantly raising the state tax on tobacco.

Editor's note: Allison, MD, and Cowan, DVM, MSPH, are members of Health Link, a grassroots coalition dedicated to improving the lives of women of childbearing age and children living in Rowan County. Along with like-minded groups across the our state and country, the Health Link Advisory Board endorses a significant increase in state

tobacco taxes with a portion of proceeds earmarked for comprehensive tobacco prevention and control activities and indigent healthcare costs.

This column originally appeared in the Oct. 19 print edition of the Salisbury Post.

Letters to the Editor

Letter: Smoking's cost

Ask a longtime smoker whether or not he or she would like to quit smoking. The answer invariably is "yes, however, I have tried and failed over and over again." Therefore, it would seem logical that the simplest method to reduce the scourge of tobacco abuse is to "nip it in the bud."

A tobacco tax has the ability to decrease the initiation of smoking with teens where other policies have failed. The country as a whole has moved toward a common policy to discourage smoking through tax-induced price increases. There is no longer a debate about the deleterious effects of tobacco on our collective health, economy and daily lives. Nowhere is this more obvious than with the exposure of children to smoke.

Teens smoke to emulate elders and "fit in." Parents knowingly expose babies to secondhand smoke that increases the risk of SIDS and sinopulmonary infections. Asthma sufferers endure increased lung dysfunction. Common sense forces us to realize the countless negative aspects of smoking with marginal benefit to Tobacco Road cigarette manufacturers.

As a pediatrician, I find it incumbent upon us as a people to do anything possible to decrease our children's exposure and access to tobacco products. The facts are present; now let's get the votes and change our lives and our children's future dramatically. Increase the state tax on tobacco.

-- Chris J. Magryta, M.D.

Letter: Raise cigarette tax

As an advocate for raising the state tax on tobacco and as a supporter of the informative Oct. 19 article by Dr. Trevor Allison and Jim Cowan, I would like to state the benefits as published by the National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids. The center projects that raising N.C. cigarette taxes by 75 cents per pack would: (1) decrease youth smoking rates by 16.1

percent; (2) protect 33,750 children who are alive today from smoking-caused death; and (3) prevent 14,050 smoke-affected births during the next five years.

I am a mother, grandmother and nurse who advocates constantly to prevent health problems by taking care of our bodies and environment. Also, since second-hand smoke is estimated by the National Cancer Institute to cause an estimated 1,868 to 2,708 infant deaths annually in the United States due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, we all need to join forces to decrease cigarette smoking.

I am a former smoker and am aware of the multi-facets of smoking. While smoking was once regarded as a social activity, now we all know the consequences of smoking, namely health problems that many times lead to death. We are told by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that if current cigarette use among our youth continues, more than 6 million kids under age 18 alive today will eventually die from smoke-related diseases.

Please support all efforts to decrease smoking. A gift to our children and grandchildren is our united support to decrease smoking.

-- Martha K. Baker Mooresville