

Reversing the influence of big tobacco in Nevada

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“It is not a natural thing to smoke; people start when they are young because they believe it is fashionable or rebellious, and they continue because they become addicted. Marketing joins with psychopharmacology to transform a rare or ritual indulgence into a brain-rewiring mega-morbidity.” Robert Proctor, PhD, from “The Golden Holocaust.”

Last week, the Office of the Surgeon General released an important report, “Preventing Tobacco Use among Youth and Young Adults.” Since the landmark report in 1964 on smoking and health, every Surgeon General has weighed in on the health consequences of tobacco use.

In addition to an update to previous reports on tobacco use among young people, the new report details the pernicious influence of marketing by big tobacco on tobacco use among teenagers and young adults. Noting that adolescence and emerging adulthood are stages of life with increased vulnerability to tobacco use, the report concludes that there is a causal relationship between advertising and promotional activities aimed at adults and tobacco initiation and use by youth and young adults.

Big tobacco currently spends \$10 billion a year or \$1.2 million per hour in the US to addict new smokers and to keep current smokers hooked. In Nevada, tobacco companies will spend an estimated \$95 million this year alone peddling their poison to “replace” those who’ve been able to successfully quit smoking and smokers whose lives have been cut short by their addiction.

Despite the professed marketing intentions of big tobacco, the Surgeon General’s report concludes that industry advertising and promotional activities have directly resulted in the initiation and use of tobacco by kids and young consumers.

Efforts to make their products appealing, accessible, and affordable to kids include price discounts on cigarettes through coupons, poorly regulated on-line sales of tobacco products, product design and packaging that appeal to youth, incentives to retailers to promote and favorably place tobacco products in convenience stores and other places frequented by youth, and the cynical use of media to encourage young people to start smoking.

The toll of tobacco use on our kids and young adults

At a news conference last week, Surgeon General Dr. Regina Benjamin stressed the importance of prevention. Noting that 9 out of 10 smokers start smoking by the age of 18 and 99 percent of all first-time tobacco use among adult smokers occurs before the age of 26, she asserted “I want to make sure we’re doing everything that we can to prevent kids from ever starting to smoke or use tobacco products.”

The Surgeon General's report notes that each day in the US, nearly 4,000 kids under the age of 18 smoke their first cigarette and over 1,000 young people under the age of 18 become daily cigarette smokers. An estimated 2,700 kids in Nevada will become new daily smokers in 2012 and almost 50,000 kids now under the age of 18 and alive in Nevada will die prematurely from smoking.

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, the percentage of youth smokers in Nevada and the US declined substantially. However, the decrease in teen smoking and the use of smokeless tobacco by youth appears to have stalled over the last five or six years. Presently, 17 percent of Nevada high school students still smoke.

Reversing the influence of big tobacco

The Surgeon General's report provides an exhaustive inventory and assessment of policies and programs to prevent tobacco use by youth and young adults. Its authors determined that "the evidence is sufficient to conclude that mass media campaigns, comprehensive community programs, and comprehensive statewide tobacco control programs can prevent the initiation of tobacco use and reduce its prevalence among youth."

In Nevada, measures needed to reverse the influence of big tobacco include protecting and extending smoke-free laws, such as the Nevada Clean Indoor Air Act passed in 2006, and increasing tobacco excise taxes, such as the boost in the cigarette tax by 45 cents to a total of 80 cents per pack in 2003. Such measures discourage initiation and use of tobacco by price-sensitive youth and counter messages by big tobacco that, in the words of Assistant Secretary of Health Howard Koh continue to "normalize smoking and nicotine dependence" in our society.

The report also stresses the urgency of implementing and fully funding proven tobacco prevention and cessation programs, sustained public education campaigns, and school-based policies and programs – programs that not only reduce smoking and save lives, but also reduce tobacco-related health care costs for health plans and public health insurance plans like Medicaid.

This year, the State of Nevada had an estimated \$147 million from the 1997 tobacco Master Settlement Agreement at its disposal to fund some of those proven prevention and cessation strategies. Unfortunately, state lawmakers have diverted every penny of our state's share of MSA dollars to the general fund. Thus, Nevada will spend \$0 on tobacco control during this year and the next year of the current biennium.

One rarely hears a campaign speech these days that isn't prefaced with some solemn and professed concern for the well-being of future generations. If that were true, one of our state's top priorities would be to embrace the Surgeon General's message and immediately begin reversing the influence of big tobacco on the health of our kids.

A complete list of reports from the US Surgeon General can be found at www.surgeongeneral.gov.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and President of the Nevada Public Health Association.