

Eliminating scourge that is tobacco

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Sunday, August 5, 2012

From time to time, I am asked about the source of my militancy on tobacco issues. My reasons are both professional and personal.

As a researcher and educator, I have come to appreciate the enormous public health toll of smoking and tobacco use. Despite nearly six decades of progress since the first Surgeon General's report on smoking and health in 1964, cigarette smoking and exposure to second hand smoke remain the leading cause of preventable death and disability in Nevada.

Tobacco use also represents a formidable obstacle to economic development in our state and related efforts to tame health care costs picked up by businesses and taxpayers. Each year, smoking is responsible for a staggering \$2.6 billion in direct health care costs, lost income and earnings, and diminished workplace productivity in Nevada.

Professionally speaking, then, doing or saying nothing about tobacco has never been an option.

My antipathy to all things tobacco, though, stems largely from the toll of cigarette smoking on my family and those I love.

I never thought anything could be worse than the slow, cruel manner in which emphysema claimed my father's life a couple of years ago – that is, until I witnessed firsthand my younger sister Amy's equally brutal battle with lung cancer this past year. Tomorrow would have been Amy's 51<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Make no mistake. The only thing that the tobacco industry will mourn about the death of my sister is the revenue they've now lost from a woman who smoked two packs a day for the past 35 years. Indeed, an ongoing chore for big tobacco is replacing smokers who quit or, like my sister, whose lives have been cut short by their addiction.

Fortunately, that task is more difficult than it was in the early 1970s when Amy smoked her first cigarette. Parents and their teenage children are much wiser to the harm posed by smoking and thus less likely take up smoking and become lifetime nicotine addicts like Amy.

Nonetheless, the same combination of innocence, ignorance, and invincibility that compels teenagers to jump in the icy waters of the Truckee River on the first warm day of the spring helps explain the fact that 16 percent of Washoe County high school students currently smoke and nearly 40 percent have used or tried cigarettes at some point in their young lives. This year,

an estimated 2,700 teenagers in Nevada will become new daily smokers and nearly 50,000 kids now under the age of 18 and alive in Nevada will die prematurely from smoking.

In other words, plenty of unfinished work lies before us.

One immediate step we could take is the restoration of state funding for evidence-based tobacco control efforts. For each of the next two years, the State of Nevada will receive nearly \$150 million in revenue from the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement and state tobacco taxes, yet the state will not allocate a single penny during current biennium to proven tobacco prevention and cessation programs and services.

We thus have a clear understanding of the public health problem posed by youth tobacco use in our state, a large body of well-vetted practices at our disposal to reverse that threat, and a deep well of funding to underwrite such work.

The only remaining question is whether or not state lawmakers possess the political courage to restore tobacco control funding and take the next step to eliminating the scourge that is tobacco in Nevada.

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.