

## Taxing Tobacco, Saving Lives

Up until now, I have been using this column primarily to give you advice you can use for promoting your own health. But there is more to preventive medicine and health promotion than the opportunity of promoting your own health; there is also the obligation of promoting the health of others. I have just returned from Prevention '98, the annual convention of the American College of Preventive Medicine, inspired with enthusiasm to improve the health of our community. But it is our community, and its health is a product of all of our efforts. At the moment, I could use your help.

Most of you are almost certainly aware of the efforts at the federal level to restrict the activities of the Tobacco Industry and limit cigarette sales. The fate of this effort, however, remains in doubt. Legislation must first navigate the labyrinth of government and special interest groups. While the process plays itself out for good or for bad, approximately 3000 children and adolescents start smoking in the US every day. Many of them will become addicted before smoking legislation changes. A third of those that do, or 1000 out of the 3000, will eventually die as a direct result of their smoking. In short, smoking is the single most important cause of preventable death in the US, and youth smoking is on the rise. This is true for the country, and true for the Valley. It is a crisis that demands our attention, and our action.

A group called ***MATCH***, *Mobilize Against Tobacco for Children's Health*, centered in Avon, is supporting legislation to raise the tax on a pack of cigarettes in Connecticut by 49 cents. The group's efforts are very much justified by the available research evidence. Underage smokers are most affected by price, and are

discouraged from smoking when prices rise. Every person who never starts smoking is a potential life saved.

A tobacco tax increase may be beneficial to current smokers, as well. The higher cost of cigarettes may discourage smoking, but this effect is likely to be small. Money raised from the tax might be used, at least in part, to fund interventions for smoking cessation. One of the physicians in the preventive medicine training program at Griffin, Dr. Josette Boukhalil, and I have submitted a proposal for an innovative smoking cessation program in an effort to obtain funding. Such programs would be more widely implemented if funding were assured.

What can you do? Call or write your legislator and lend your support to the tax on tobacco. Even if you smoke, please weigh the extra money spent against the lives of children who start smoking every day. If you are currently smoking, you know better than the rest of us how hard it is to quit. You also know how important it is to keep young people from starting. You can help.

If you do not know how to reach your legislator, you may contact the MATCH program directly at 1-888-336-MATCH, or 860-676-9320.

The health of our community, of our friends and neighbors and coworkers, our families, ourselves and our children, is our shared responsibility. Working together, we can make our corner of the world a better place. Decreasing underage smoking would be an excellent start. Please take an active role in supporting the tax on cigarettes; don't assume someone else will take care of it. Every voice counts. And once you find your voice, I would be happy to hear it suggesting other ways to improve the health of



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our community. Call me at 732-7328, or e-mail me at [katzdl@pol.net](mailto:katzdl@pol.net). In the meantime, I'll try to suggest other projects worthy of our efforts as well in upcoming columns. After all, how many illnesses would we need to prevent, how many lives would we need to save, to know that we were involved in the worthiest of efforts? There is much to be done; I look forward to facing the challenges together.

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