

Stanley Block: Don't cut R.I. cigarette tax

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By Stanley Block

Some members of the Rhode Island House have introduced a new bill to cut the state's cigarette tax, now at \$3.46 a pack, by \$1, citing the threat that the tax poses to small businesses. When deciding on whether to cut the cigarette tax, our legislators should consider Rhode Island's public health and the potential long-term costs of smoking. The state has the highest cigarette tax rate in the nation.

Many studies suggest that raising cigarette taxes lowers smoking rates, particularly among youth.

Lowering the tax might reverse this trend. However, we should move beyond looking at the cigarette tax, and do more to address the prevalence of smoking among our youth and affected communities.

We should foster commitment from our community's parents, leaders and teachers to educate young Rhode Islanders about the ills of smoking. Almost 90 percent of all regular smokers began smoking at or before 18. In Rhode Island 1,200 kids become new daily smokers each year; this breaks down to 100 kids each month. It is up to us to make sure our youth understand how truly addictive smoking is, and help those adults already addicted find the resources and support they need to quit.

In my three decades as medical director of the Providence Community Health Centers (PCHC), I have seen thousands of inner-city Rhode Islanders who suffer from severe respiratory ailments, such as asthma and emphysema, which resulted from, or were exacerbated by, years of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. I see first-hand how difficult it is to treat patients with an addiction to nicotine, especially those already prone to respiratory diseases. For treatment to work, the individual must be truly committed to quitting and the necessary resources must be in place to support this commitment.

The PCHC has been fortunate to receive federal funding to provide nicotine-replacement therapy (NRT), such as patches and gum, and cessation-support services to uninsured and under-insured Rhode Islanders. In addition to the medication and support services, we are also able to provide comprehensive counseling for adolescents and families who smoke to help them finally achieve their goal of quitting.

Adolescents greatly underestimate the addictive potential of tobacco and nicotine. They never think that they'll become addicted. Many influences lead them to try smoking, and once they start, they're hooked. Being around family members, older youth and peers who smoke prompts many youth to try it, before they learn the deadly consequences. The depiction of smoking as a "cool" pastime in Hollywood and advertising campaigns reinforce this temptation. It is up to us to make sure that the truth is heard, so that youth can make informed decisions and remain as healthy as possible.

Teens can better relate to the short-term harms of smoking — bad breath, premature wrinkles, yellowing of teeth and nails and unpleasant body odor. These impacts are immediate and are things they worry about on a daily basis. Secondly, former or current smokers can share their experiences with youth, to encourage them to stop or not start in first place. They can discuss how painful it is to quit.

PCHC is hard at work educating and counseling our community on the dangers of smoking, and the resources available to help smokers quit. You can help, too. Spread the word about this movement and the Tobacco-Free Providence campaign. Anything we can do to stop our youth from smoking will make Providence a safer, healthier place to live.

Stanley Block, M.D., is an allergist and medical director of the Providence Community Health Centers (PCHC). PCHC received part of the [federal stimulus](#) funding awarded to the Providence Mayor's Substance Abuse Prevention Council and the Rhode Island Department of Health to help uninsured patients become tobacco-free.