

Tobacco taxes can lead to a healthier Maine

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By Elinor Goldberg

Many news outlets have been running stories about the increase in federal tobacco taxes that took effect April 1. In fact, most cigarette smokers noticed the jump earlier, since manufacturers raised prices in anticipation of the deadline.

What the stories did not mention, or noted only in passing, is the purpose of the tax increase: financing health care for children.

Tobacco taxes are in fact part of legislation that expanded the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, that is used by all 50 states. In Maine, nearly 15,000 children receive insurance through SCHIP, and the new law will provide funding for at least 15,000 more.

The benefits to families already hard-pressed by the recession are difficult to overstate. For many, SCHIP will make the difference between a last-minute, desperate trip to the emergency room for a sick child and being able to make an appointment with a pediatrician when a child first shows signs of illness.

This makes a huge difference in costs to taxpayers, too. A doctor's visit costs \$100, while a trip to the emergency room costs \$375 and a day's hospital stay \$2,500.

Smokers understandably feel singled out by increased taxes but, in fact, the issue is about a lot more than raising revenue to pay for a vital state and federal health program.

As Maine learned when it first increased state tobacco taxes nearly a decade ago, a tax increase is one of the best ways we have to discourage smoking, and it's even more effective in deterring kids from taking up the habit. As reported in the recent Kid's Count data book, Maine teenagers are smoking cigarettes at just half the rate they did a decade ago. Price is one of the key reasons so many of them haven't taken up smoking.

Adult smokers, too, want to quit. A solid majority of those who smoke say they'd like to stop, but haven't been able to. We've found that price increases, and tax increases, are one occasion when smokers finally decide to kick the habit, and succeed in doing so.

Because Maine has decided to invest in anti-smoking programs, help is easily available, and the benefits of stopping smoking, or never starting, are enormous.

Despite decades of credible warnings about the dangers of tobacco in increased rates of cancer and heart

disease, followed by premature death, too many Americans still smoke. One fifth of the adult population lights up regularly, and until recently, at least that many kids were taking up the habit, too.

Now, that has changed, at least in Maine. From the latest surveys, we find that just 14 percent of teens are smoking. At one time, Maine had the highest rate of young adults smoking in the country, so this is a major shift.

Because the federal tax increase affects Maine, too, we can expect another significant decrease in teen smoking as a result.

As a society, we're always looking for ways we can improve health, particularly for children, and we're increasingly aware of the high costs of health care, much of which comes from preventable illnesses.

Of all the steps we can take to improve outcomes for kids, convincing them not to smoke is still one of the most important in savings lives and promoting good health.

Industry critics of higher taxes say that as tobacco taxes go up, sales go down. That's why, even though the federal tax increase is 69 cents per pack, manufacturers raised prices by at least 81 cents.

But that's just the point. If we can continue to reduce smoking rates, we will be able to prevent crippling and fatal illnesses and reallocate our health-care dollars to fight diseases for which there are no effective cures. And our kids will be able to lead better lives than many of their elders, who decided too late that it was really time to quit smoking.

The tobacco tax may be a short-term nuisance. But it carries the promise of allowing millions of American children to grow up and lead healthier and more productive lives.

Elinor Goldberg is the president/CEO of the Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide multi-issue child advocacy organization.