

It's time to clear out the smoke

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"The debate is over. The science is clear. Secondhand smoke is not a mere annoyance but a serious health hazard," said Surgeon General Richard Carmona, summarizing the content of the 2006 Surgeon General's report on the health effects of exposure to tobacco smoke.

The 1986 Surgeon General's report first concluded that secondhand smoke definitely causes disease in nonsmokers. The 2006 report added massive and conclusive medical evidence that indicts secondhand smoke as the third leading cause of premature death in America. The yearly death count of nonsmokers tops 53,000. Still, more than 126 million nonsmokers are exposed to what is considered America's number one airborne carcinogen, containing more than 50 cancer-causing compounds.

The scientific evidence in this report proves that environmental tobacco smoke definitely causes:

- Premature death and disease in both adults and children;

- Lung cancer and heart disease in adults;

- Increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome and serious childhood respiratory illnesses, including pneumonia and asthma;

- Reduction in birth weight and lung function throughout childhood in babies born to exposed pregnant women;

- Immediate adverse cardiovascular effects in adults. Exposure to secondhand smoke of less than a half-hour can precipitate a heart attack in at-risk individuals.

The report also suggested that environmental tobacco smoke may cause an increased risk of childhood lymphoma, leukemia and brain tumors as well as breast cancer, nasal sinus cancer, asthma and chronic obstructive lung disease in adults.

Using the vast amount of available data from across the country, the report demonstrated that smoke-free regulations do not have an adverse economic effect on the hospitality industry. It further concludes that there is no safe level of environmental tobacco smoke and that establishing smoke-free indoor environments is the only way to eliminate exposure of nonsmokers in the workplace, in restaurants and bars, and in other public places.

The Surgeon General's report also affirmed that segregation of smokers into separate smoking rooms, even with independent ventilation systems, does not

adequately protect nonsmokers from the carcinogens. There is no ventilation system that can accomplish this objective.

Excellent progress has been made in reducing involuntary exposure to secondhand smoke over the past 20 years. Much of this advancement is due to smoke-free local ordinances that have rapidly spread across the country. Twenty-six Indiana communities have passed excellent smoke-free ordinances in recent years. Some entire states are fast becoming smoke-free.

Twenty-six states have already passed meaningful smoke-free laws including 22 that eliminate smoking in both restaurants and bars. Our neighboring states of Illinois and Ohio have enacted exceptional state smoke-free statutes that cover all restaurants, bars and workplaces. The Illinois law even includes casinos. It's Indiana's turn to do the same. Indiana is ripe to pass a statewide smoke-free statute. But let's do it right and protect everyone.

This year, statewide smoke-free legislation has been introduced in the Indiana legislature, but it's far from perfect. While containing aspects of good environmental tobacco smoke protection policy, like the Indianapolis ordinance, it includes many exemptions where smoking would be permitted, including bars and restaurants that only allow patrons who are 18 and older. In its current form, it does not provide broad protection for workers and patrons. The legislation also should encompass elimination of secondhand smoke in all restaurants, bars, bowling alleys, health-care institutions, retail establishments, private clubs, hotels and casinos.

Exposure of nonsmokers to the smoke of another's poisonous addiction is quickly becoming universally unacceptable. This change in public attitude is due to our increasing knowledge of tobacco smoke's deadly effects and the belief that the right to smoke ends when it affects the health and well-being of others.

Let's encourage Indiana legislators to place politics and special interests aside and pass a progressive model statute, free from exemptions, which will truly ensure Hoosiers comprehensive protection.

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