

For best bang, increase tax on tobacco by a buck

It is time to increase the tax on cigarettes in Iowa by \$1 a pack. Doing so would be among the most important public-health measures ever implemented in Iowa. It would save thousands of lives.

Study after study has shown that fewer teens take up smoking when cigarettes are more expensive. The quit rate among teens and adults increases as the price of cigarettes goes up: Over time, states with high tobacco taxes and strong antismoking programs have decreased rates of tobacco-related disease, and this in turn results in a healthier work force and lower health-care costs.

The tobacco industry is aware of the impact cigarette price has on youth smoking: It knows people who don't get addicted to nicotine in their teens are unlikely to take up the habit. That's why the tobacco industry invests so much opposing a significant increase in the tobacco tax. It also provides kickbacks to retailers who sell cigarettes and join in efforts to block an increase in the price of cigarettes.

These opponents of a higher tobacco tax advance a number of arguments against raising the price of cigarettes. These are all a smoke screen designed to keep smoking rates high and protect the profits of the tobacco industry. They do not hold up to careful examination.

You will hear that border towns will be hurt economically when smokers cross the border to buy cheaper cigarettes from retailers in neighboring states that have a lower tax. Research in states that have raised their taxes indicates this border effect is minor and affects in-state sales of cigarettes by less than 5 percent. The majority of smokers buy cigarettes one pack at a time at the highest-priced outlets — convenience stores. It doesn't make sense for them to take the time (or spend the gas money) to drive across the border to make such a purchase.



George
WEINER

You will hear that the tobacco tax is a regressive tax, hurting those who can least afford to pay it. Those who buy cigarettes are the ones who suffer most from tobacco-related diseases and, in fact, benefit most from policies that decrease tobacco use.

You will hear that a smaller increase in the tax will achieve the desired goal. Study after study has demonstrated that the higher the price of cigarettes, the lower the teen smoking rate, and the greater the health benefit.

You will hear that we should not increase the cigarette tax by \$1 because we can't agree on how to use the resulting revenue. The \$1 increase is primarily about the health of our youth, not about generation of revenue. A vigorous discussion about how we should use the resulting revenue should not impact enthusiasm for a \$1 increase. My preference would be that a significant portion of the new revenue be used for tobacco control, cancer control and cancer-research programs. This would enhance our ability to address the health issues caused by tobacco that impact the people who pay the tax.

Let's put this in perspective. As a cancer researcher, I am aware that one-third of the 6,000 cancer deaths in Iowa each year are due to tobacco use. As a cancer physician, I have tried to help many wonderful people who have suffered and died unnecessarily from cancers caused by smoking. Uniformly, these people wish they had quit at an early age, or, better yet, never taken up the habit. Never have I had cancer patients or their loved ones say they were grateful that the price of their cigarettes was low.

An easy and proven method for decreasing this unnecessary suffering and death is in our grasp. Yes, a smaller increase in the cigarette tax would be better than no increase at all, but we should not nickel and dime the future health of Iowans.

Dr. **GEORGE WEINER** is director of the Holden Comprehensive Cancer Center and chair of the Iowa Consortium for Comprehensive Cancer Control.