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Editorial: Steep increase in cigarette tax can be beneficial

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October 24, 2007

A tax that saves lives and pumps money into health programs is about as benign as taxes get.

That's what's promised as Wisconsin's cigarette tax increases by \$1, up to \$1.77 a pack, as a result of a state budget compromise approved by the Wisconsin Legislature on Tuesday.

Higher taxes reduce the number of people who get sick or die of smoking-related diseases when cigarettes become too pricey, especially to teenagers who can't legally buy smokes but get them anyway, according to Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Cigarette companies acknowledge a connection.

"If prices were 10 percent higher, (age) 12-17 incidence would be 11.9 percent lower," RJ Reynolds' internal documents released in tobacco lawsuits said.

The \$1 tax add-on, a compromise between Gov. Jim Doyle who wanted \$1.25 and Assembly Speaker Mike Huesch who offered 75 cents, is up 130 percent.

Name brand cigarettes will cost about \$4.50 a pack, unless manufacturers and distributors cut their prices.

Wisconsin won't have the nation's highest state cigarette tax, though. That's New Jersey at \$2.57, followed by Rhode Island at \$2.46 and Washington at \$2.02. Five other states -- Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan -- are clustered at \$2 a pack.

It'd be wrong to take money out of the pockets of people who are, in many cases, addicted to cigarettes without providing a lifeline, so the budget includes \$30 million for smoking prevention and cessation programs.

Thousands of children and low-income adults will become eligible for state-subsidized health insurance, too.

In addition, if fewer of workers and their family members smoke, increases in employers' insurance costs should be curtailed and there'll be fewer sick days related to smoking.

The cumulative result -- fewer new smokers, quit-smoking help and lower-cost public and private health insurance -- make the \$1 increase in cigarette taxes good public policy.

Of course, if you're one of the roughly one-fifth of the adults in Wisconsin who smoke, the tax increase forces you to make a decision that you've probably been putting off.

With scientific evidence so strong that it's no longer in doubt whether even secondhand smoke presents a significant health risk and with a \$365-a-year cost increase for pack-a-day smokers, the new tax can be the motivation you've needed to adopt a more healthy lifestyle.

No one's saying that you can't smoke.

But at the high cost to your budget and your health, do you really want to anymore?

On the subject

A state budget compromise could've -- and should've -- been reached months ago.

The Republicans who control the Wisconsin Assembly and the Democrats who control the Wisconsin Senate just couldn't agree on things.

It was partisan politics at its worst.

As frustration grew, one legislator even called for a law to force the budget committee to meet under penalty of arrest if they didn't.

Rep. Scott Suder, R-Abbotsford, who isn't on the committee that would face the sanctions, said that there's renewed interest in a proposed law to shut down non-essential state services if deadlines aren't met.

It's time to do something to hold legislators accountable because self-policing doesn't work.