

Don't drop cigarette tax in battle over budget

By DR. MICHAEL FIORE

With the rhetoric surrounding the late-by-a-mile state budget heating up, and in particular its proposed \$1.25 cigarette tax increase, little attention has been paid to the health impact of this proposal on smokers.

Given that almost 1 million of our residents remain addicted to tobacco, will Wisconsin smokers become victims or victors in a final resolution?



Fiore

As the 15-year director for the UW Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention and a practicing Wisconsin physician for almost two decades, I believe we must ensure that smokers — those who will pay for this tax increase — emerge as victors.

This debate brings the possibility of a historic convergence.

Two proposals, a \$1.25 per pack tax increase and \$30 million per year to fund a comprehensive state tobacco control program with most earmarked for helping smokers quit, have been introduced by the governor and embraced by legislators of both parties. This duo offers a tremendous opportunity for improved health and well-being.

Why are both parts of this proposal so essential? First, tobacco kills, robbing more than 7,000 Wisconsin families of a loved one each year. An estimated 400,000 smokers in our state will be killed prematurely if they are unable to successfully quit.

By ensuring that the \$1.25 per pack cigarette excise tax increase is linked to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommended level for tobacco control funding, at least \$30 million per year in Wisconsin, we can begin to turn the tide of tobacco caused illness and death.

Second, most smokers today want to break free of tobacco, and the tax increase by itself will encourage almost 50,000 to quit.

To address the issue of tax fairness I offer this: How fair is the current system that concentrates tobacco-caused illness and death among so many disadvantaged smokers in our state seduced by low-priced cigarettes and little help in quitting?

Raising taxes while at the same time providing the \$30 million per year it will take to help every smoker in our state successfully quit is more than fair — it is the only responsible path to take.

Once we get that elusive budget bill onto the governor's desk — this week, next week? — I'm hopeful it will include a victory for a healthy Wisconsin.

The best way to do this is to ensure we don't abandon smokers.

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