

## **Editorial: Health experts adopt global smoking plan**

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World Health Organization experts this week made a chilling prediction: Unless countries across the globe get serious about fighting tobacco addiction, smoking-related illnesses will claim 1 billion lives this century.

And the strategies the group suggested are the same ones being debated right here in Wausau: If governments introduced measures such as high tobacco taxes, bans on cigarette advertising and laws making all public places tobacco-free, smoking rates could be cut in half by 2050.

"Tobacco is a defective product. It kills half of its customers," said Douglas Bettcher, head of the WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative. Bettcher and other WHO experts were meeting Monday at an international conference to draw up a master plan for the world to kick the habit.

Tobacco "kills 5.4 million people per year and half of those deaths are in developing countries," Bettcher said. "That's like one jumbo jet going down every hour."

But there's a clear path away from the needless deaths, Bettcher said. He pointed to tough anti-smoking laws in Singapore, Australia and Thailand that have helped residents quit.

"It's a completely preventable epidemic," he said.

And that brings us back to Wisconsin, where statewide smoking measures are smoldering away in Madison, awaiting action one way or the other, and where taxpayers spend about \$500 million every year in smoke-related Medicare costs.

Gov. Jim Doyle has proposed banning tobacco use in all workplaces and increasing the cigarette tax by \$1.25, with the money raised to be dedicated to smoking-related health care costs and cessation programs.

The tax has survived the first round of legislative tinkering with Doyle's budget. The workplace smoking ban hasn't been acted on yet.

That's unfortunate, because every day that lawmakers delay, hundreds of Wisconsin kids light up for the first time, according to the American Cancer Society. And one-third of the kids who become smokers will die of a tobacco-related disease.

Opponents of a statewide ban consistently portray this as a property-rights issue. They say owners can set whatever smoking rules they like in their businesses.

But if you buy that argument, you have to believe that restaurant owners should be allowed to set their own rules about cleanliness and sanitation, and that tavernkeepers should be free to serve whomever they want, regardless of age.

In this case, public health trumps property rights -- as it does in any number of other realms.

And the path is clear.

Wausau is the only municipality in the metro area in which elected officials found the political spine to protect the public. Others are waiting for the state to act.

The best-case scenario would have Wisconsin enacting a smoke-free workplace law. But local officials deferring to the state are really just avoiding making difficult decisions for themselves.

Stop dodging this public safety issue. Do your jobs and pass local smokefree workplace laws.

If the World Health Organization can figure this out, surely we can do it in central Wisconsin.