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Column: Smoking ban will cut health care costs

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Recent press reports have indicated that state Sens. Roger Breske and Russ Decker are blocking in the Legislature an appropriate proposal to ban smoking in all Wisconsin workplaces -- including restaurants and taverns.

I have spoken to both men about their reluctance to move forward on this important pro-wellness step in Wisconsin and frankly, I remain puzzled with their explanations.

To his credit, Gov. Jim Doyle has been tenacious about advocating a statewide ban on smoking in workplaces. Illinois and Minnesota have recently enacted statewide smoking bans. Why would they do that and why would Doyle call for Wisconsin to follow suit? Here are some reasons:

- Secondhand smoke is the third-leading cause of preventable death, killing 53,000 people in the United States each year, according to health experts.
- Indirect exposure to smoke kills 853 Wisconsinites annually, according to the state Division of Health, with ischemic heart disease and lung cancer the leading results.

Clearly the smoking ban is a tilt away from smoking, which is a good thing. State officials report that 7,200 Wisconsinites die annually because of the direct results of smoking; 2,300 from cardiovascular disease caused by smoking; 2,200 from cancer caused by smoking, and nearly 2,000 from respiratory disease caused by smoking.

Smoking kills people and everyone knows it. It really isn't rocket science and our prudent public policy initiatives should follow informed and credible research directed toward resolution of key health concerns.

Everyone also knows we have a growing health care crisis in America and this is everybody's business. Getting affordable, quality health care services to all citizens is a tall order. And that's why wellness efforts in our homes and in our workplaces are more critically important than they have ever been.

In our company in Merrill, 215 employees recently joined a "Choose to Lose" weight-loss campaign running for eight weeks. Together they lost 1,083 pounds -- that's more than half a ton in excess weight gone -- creating a healthier workforce. Both neat and important.

In our company, when we checked last year, we found that most female employees and spouses over age 40 had had a mammogram during the previous two years. But we wanted to increase participation. We did some nudging, put some incentives in place, and mammography utilization increased 27 percent last year in the Church Mutual family. Again, both neat and important.

Workplace smoking cessation campaigns pay dividends, but so can this proposed step at the state level to end smoke in the restaurants, bars and other facilities where healthy citizens wish to work and visit and stay healthy.

Let's nudge our senators to do the right thing.

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