

Editorial: For smoking tax, for health

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Wisconsin needs new revenues to pay for health care, and the proposal by Gov. Jim Doyle to hike the state's cigarette tax by as much as \$1.25 a pack offers one vehicle for collecting the necessary funds.

As part of a broad anti-smoking initiative, Doyle wants revenues from the tax to be used to help cover increasing health care costs, with a special focus on addressing expenses related to smoking. We think it is appropriate to separate the tax issues from other aspects of the Doyle proposal such as a statewide smoking ban, which we will comment on in the future.

On the question of whether to impose a dramatically higher cigarette tax, we recognize the concerns expressed by those who suggest that such a tax imposes a burden on those least likely to be able to afford it. And we would generally oppose such a levy. But the fact that this tax is both an incentive for smokers to stop and a means by which to raise revenues to treat smokers leads us to see this as an acceptable demand.

There is no question that the money is needed at a time when the state is spending \$1 billion a year to help fund health care programs for elderly, disabled and low-income residents.

If calculations from the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau are correct, the new tax would cover about a quarter of the cost of those programs.

Predictably, Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch, R-West Salem, and lobbyists for business interests are raising the usual no-new-taxes objections. But a targeted tax on cigarettes does not reach into the pocket of the general population. Instead, it helps defray costs that would otherwise have to be paid from general revenues from county, state and federal treasuries.

Is it tough on smokers? Yes. In fact, it might just be tough enough to convince some to quit. That would reduce revenues from taxes on cigarette sales, but it would also reduce the need for those revenues by helping former smokers to live healthier and longer lives.

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