

Banning Smoking in Public Places is Good for Public Health

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EDITORS: Please accept the following opinion-editorial submitted by University of New Hampshire Professor of Health Management and Policy Marc Hiller, DrPH

Over the years, I have been both appreciative and sometimes frustrated listening to the views of our elected leaders, as well as a few of my professional colleagues at the University of New Hampshire, about initiatives to restrict smoking in workplaces and other public areas (e.g., restaurants, shopping areas, university/college campuses) to reduce exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS).

It is obvious that in many of these exchanges, there is a fundamentally different basis for our respective positions about the need to adopt clean indoor air policies. Those with whom I most often disagree view it as an attack on civil liberties. I -- a champion for civil liberties -- along with many others concerned about the public's health and well-being, view it as a health issue, as well as a protection of the freedom of those who choose not to smoke, or simply those who choose not to breathe in someone else's smoke.

Democratic governments always have recognized that there can and should be a limitation on people's and businesses' behavior when that behavior affects other people -- especially other people's health and safety. Drunken driving laws, health standards for restaurants, pollution restrictions for industry, safety standards in manufacturing -- all these are born from an understanding that freedom is not absolute. One shouldn't legally be able to act in a manner that harms others.

Proposals for and policies adopted to promote clean air do not deny the ability of smokers to smoke. But smoking in occupational work settings, schools, colleges/universities and other public places denies the ability of employees, students and other customers of those places to breathe air that is free of known carcinogens. It is true that cigarettes are legal products. But so too are alcohol and automobiles legal products, and few argue with the wisdom of banning them from

being used together in a way that is known to harm others.

As for the argument touted by some businesses that policies designed to promote clean indoor air will simply hurt their bottom lines, there is overwhelming scientific evidence based on research done in communities and states across our nation that shows that this is not the case.

Many businesses actually report that they are doing better since clean air policies have been implemented. Long-term experience in other areas with smoking bans has shown that customers return to businesses that may experience temporary drops. This is most likely due to the fact that nonsmokers outnumber smokers 3 to 1, and report increased frequency in patronizing smokefree stores and restaurants.

But more importantly, I can think of no other industry in which it is acceptable to make the argument that the health of employees, customers or students should be jeopardized because it's better for the business's bottom line. We don't allow chemical plants or oil industries to knowingly endanger workers' health because they can make more money. I don't believe bars or restaurants, or any other stores that cater to the public seeking their business, should be allowed to do so either.

Again, this is an issue where perspectives among rational people may differ. I view it as a health issue. I know of too many fine people who have died of cancer, heart disease or chronic lung disease who had years of exposure to the toxins associated with tobacco. I know others who suffer from these diseases, and/or who have asthma and other respiratory diseases that are triggered or made worse by ETS. I do not desire to persecute those who choose to smoke, though I would urge each one to give up the habit. Yet, I do feel that those who choose not to smoke should be supported in that decision and should not be forced to endure the harmful (and potentially deadly) effects of smoking such as cancer and other health problems, simply by seeking to visit, work in or attend a restaurant, a bar, a store or an academic institution.

I appreciate that this issue is one on which disagreement will likely continue over time, particularly given the advertising and marketing efforts mounted by the tobacco industry. However, we must continue to promote and strengthen public health policies and practices associated with tobacco control, prevention and cessation -- if not for ourselves, for our children, and their children.

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