

INTRODUCTION

Saving Our Young People from Tobacco

In this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* we present several papers and commentaries which address perhaps the greatest public health threat of our time—one particularly troubling for a state like North Carolina. The statistics presented to demonstrate the societal and personal impact of smoking among our young people in this state are staggering, yet American tobacco companies hammer away at this population with unrelenting, though often subtle, pressure. Public health and medical professionals often are dismayed by their seemingly ineffective efforts to counter the effects of tobacco advertising and the social pressures on youth to experiment with and to regularly use tobacco products. Parents and local public officials share the disappointment and despair of their local health professionals.

We are fortunate in having in North Carolina a strong and innovative state office of Tobacco Prevention and Control within the NC Department of Health and Human Services. The director of that office, Sally Herndon Malek, has teamed with colleagues from the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Public Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to offer a comprehensive overview of the challenge and viable options for addressing this important public health menace affecting our youth. The issue brief by Malek and her colleagues is followed by seven “commentaries” which provide additional information pertinent to these issues.

The first of these commentaries is by Cheryl Heaton, President of the American Legacy Foundation in Washington, DC, who spells out in a hard-hitting message the threat our young people face as the targets of tobacco company advertising. James Davis describes the efforts of the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission in relation to tobacco use prevention and cessation education.

Next, Adam Goldstein, MD, a family physician from UNC-Chapel Hill, offers three concrete steps that might be taken to lessen the effects of tobacco on NC health. Addressing the environmental effects of tobacco use, Doug Paletta, a UNC undergraduate, spells out the efforts of a broad coalition of young people—formed as part of the Governor’s Teen Tobacco Use Prevention Summit in 2000—who are dedicated to urging NC school systems to enact regulations leading to “100% Tobacco-Free Schools.”

Finally, we offer three policy analyses by Representative Alma Adams, PhD, and Roxanna Anderson, PhD; Richard Rosen, MD, and Charles Willson, MD; and Peg O’Connell, JD. They separately outline the case for concrete interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of youth smoking while at the same time contributing to the state’s revenue situation through a substantially increased tobacco excise tax and selected educational interventions. What these authors demonstrate is that these policies have been shown to have clear effects on the level of youth consumption of tobacco, but they also are likely to reward elected policy-makers with political support from voting constituents.

These are important, yet controversial, public health issues. We think that these pieces, taken together, give a substantial overview of the nature of the issues and the prospects for reasonable and effective intervention. We invite the comments and reactions of our readers.

—Gordon H. DeFriese, PhD
Editor-in-Chief and Publisher