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Save lives by cutting tax on smokeless tobacco

By Brad Rodu

State finances are in trouble. And once again, some lawmakers' instinctive response is to raise taxes on tobacco users to balance the budget.

To the casual observer, this looks like a no-brainer because tobacco users constitute a minority, even in Kentucky.

But in fiscal year 2008, smokers will generate \$297 million in state revenue from the national master tobacco settlement agreement and existing excise taxes.

The lawmakers who want more from tobacco consumers will rely on the usual public health arguments provided by anti-tobacco crusaders to justify higher taxes.

However, public health is exactly why lawmakers should reduce the tax on smokeless tobacco products to the lowest possible rate.

Tobacco products should be taxed according to the health risks associated with their consumption.

Cigarettes, the most dangerous products, are already taxed at high levels by most states, ostensibly to discourage smoking. But the health impact of smokeless tobacco use is vastly lower.

In 2002, Britain's Royal College of Physicians, one of the world's oldest and most prestigious medical societies, concluded that smokeless tobacco "is on the order of 10-1,000 times less hazardous than smoking."

Put in simpler and conservative terms, smokeless use carries less than 2 percent of the health risk of smoking. A rational tobacco tax policy would set taxes accordingly. If lawmakers raise the cigarette tax to \$1, the tax on smokeless tobacco should be two cents.

Economic research shows that a large price differential encourages cigarette smokers to switch to smokeless tobacco. Substituting smokeless for cigarettes is a form of tobacco harm reduction, and it is attracting serious support from public policy experts worldwide.

Last year, the Royal College strongly endorsed this strategy, writing that "smokers smoke predominantly for nicotine, that nicotine itself is not especially hazardous and that if nicotine could be provided in a form that is acceptable and effective as a cigarette substitute, millions of lives could be saved."

The Royal College recognized evidence from Sweden, where men have smoked less and used more smokeless tobacco over the past century than in any other Western country.

The result: Swedish men have the lowest rates of lung cancer -- indeed, of all smoking-related deaths -- in the developed world.

How have the Swedes achieved record-setting low smoking rates? First, the Swedes know that placing tobacco discreetly inside the mouth is far safer than setting it on fire and inhaling the smoke.

In contrast, American smokers have been misled into thinking that smokeless tobacco products are just as dangerous as cigarettes. American anti-tobacco extremists actively oppose telling adult smokers about safer alternative tobacco products.

They don't want smokers to know that smokeless tobacco works as a cigarette substitute because it delivers nicotine almost as efficiently as cigarettes.

Nicotine is highly addictive but does not cause any smoking-related diseases. That makes it similar to caffeine, which is addictive but safely consumed by millions of Americans in coffee, tea and cola drinks.

Finally, modern smokeless tobacco products are entirely spit-free and available in a variety of forms, including dissolving tablets, so they provide a socially acceptable way for smokers to achieve virtually all the health benefits of being smoke-free without abstaining altogether from nicotine and tobacco.

In 2005, the Kentucky General Assembly passed historic and much-heralded legislation raising cigarette taxes to 30 cents a pack. But that bill also acknowledged that "taxing tobacco products according to relative risk is a rational tax policy and may well serve the public health goal of reducing smoking-related mortality and morbidity and lowering health care costs associated with tobacco-related disease."

Unfortunately, 29 percent of adults still smoke and more than 8,000 die each year from smoking-related diseases in Kentucky.

Transforming tobacco harm reduction into sound tax policy will allow lawmakers to meet their fiscal responsibility while fulfilling their moral obligation to help inveterate smokers lead longer and healthier lives.

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