

TEXAS21

RAISE THE TOBACCO AGE



by Kevin W. Klein, MD, DCMS President

TOBACCO

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We have come a long way since the height of the 1950s smoking pandemic when lighting a cigarette was cool, even glamorous. Smoking was a prerequisite for Hollywood actors (and may still be). I recall that many doctors smoked, and lecture halls and hospitals reeked of tobacco. In 1929, in this medical journal, Dallas County Medical Society President J.M. Martin, MD, wrote about the perils of smoking and how “this fad and fancy became a fixed habit and a menace to the health and happiness of the individual.”



A paradigm shift occurred in 1964 when Surgeon General Luther Terry, MD, announced smoking caused lung cancer. At the time 42% of Americans smoked. The United States has made great progress reducing the national incidence to 17% in 2017. Today, about 15% of Texans still smoke and unfortunately, tobacco remains the No. 1 cause of preventable disease and premature death in Texas.¹

We have before us the opportunity to dramatically improve the health of our citizens and greatly reduce nicotine addiction in our youth. Senate Bill 21 (SB 21), filed by Sen. Joan Huffman, and House Bill 749, filed by Rep. John Zerwas, MD, raise the legal age at which tobacco products can be purchased and consumed to 21. The campaign is called Tobacco 21 or Texas21.² Equally important, these bills address e-cigarettes, vaping devices, and all electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS). Texas House of Representatives member and Anesthesiologist, Dr. Zerwas has been a friend of mine since our residency days and is an ardent supporter of health for all Texans. Smoking causes harm to almost every organ and no physician's practice, specialty, or field is unaffected by tobacco addiction. Passing Tobacco 21 may seem an obvious slam-dunk, but similar legislation failed in the last legislative session.

At a recent TMA-sponsored First Tuesday at the Capitol, I witnessed our own DCMS Past-President John Carlo, MD, testifying to members of the Senate State Affairs Committee regarding SB 21. Dr. Carlo pointed out that 95% of smokers start well before age 21 and an estimated 10,400 Texas high school students become regular smokers every year.³ The younger these students are when they start using tobacco, the higher the chance they will become addicted.

As we all know, sustained use leads to many forms of cancer, heart disease and early death. Raising the legal age from 18 to 21 will help get smoking out of, and away from, our high schools as was demonstrated in the 1970s when this tactic successfully reduced underage drinking in Texas.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this legislation is the regulation of the newest fad in nicotine abuse—vaping. This new technology, using ENDS,

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simplifies and potentially magnifies exposure to nicotine. Our youth are especially at risk with the advent of enticing Juul flavors like Mint, Mango, and Creme. Teenage use has been exploding as these devices have been thought of as “safe” because there is no combustion and theoretically no carcinogens. Perhaps worse, young mothers have little realization e-cigarettes are harmful to their unborn children during pregnancy. Interestingly, Altria, the country's largest tobacco company and major stakeholder in the e-cigarette company, Juul, supports raising the minimum age to purchase tobacco and vaping products to 21. By investing in e-cigarette companies, Big Tobacco is placing a bet on the future. They must

be confident that the number of smokers and vapers will continue to rise despite raising the legal age.

Although most Texans support raising the legal age,² there will be naysayers. Many reasons will be given to undermine this legislation. Lost tax revenue and lost shopkeeper sales are purported economic reasons, but these are false arguments in the long run because of the health and productivity benefits that will accrue over time. It is said if one is old enough to go to war, one is old enough to smoke. I would argue that our soldiers would be more effective and healthier tobacco free and our military is coming around to this point of view. Then there are those who think nothing matters or that teenagers should be free to choose for themselves. Free to choose addiction? Our lawmakers must also understand that the harm caused by tobacco is not confined to the person who chooses to smoke. It costs everyone; our families, communities, and employees, as we all eventually end up sharing the costs and burden of disease inflicted by smoking.

As physicians we must take a stand and actively support raising the minimum age to buy and smoke tobacco to 21. We should share our knowledge and influence. We should talk to our lawmakers about what we see in our practices related to the harm caused by smoking. We need to tell them about the risks of teen smoking. Remind them of the healthcare costs and premature deaths caused by nicotine addiction. Let's get behind and pass Tobacco 21! **DMJ**

References

1. America's Health Rankings, 2018. <https://www.americashealthrankings.org>
2. <https://texas21.org>
3. Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, The Toll of Tobacco in Texas, Oct. 17, 2018, <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/problem/toll-us/texas>