

Ban tobacco sales until 21



The healthiest and easiest way to deal with addiction is to not become addicted, a simple truth that finally should become the foundation of law and policy regarding tobacco.

In March the Institute of Medicine of the National Institutes of Health released a convincing study on how the nation could drive down nicotine addiction and save millions of lives, at no cost to the government. According to the IM, raising the legal age for tobacco purchases from 18 to 21 would result in 50,000 fewer deaths from lung cancer and 250,000 fewer premature deaths from all smoking-caused diseases for people born between 2000 and 2019. And, it would eliminate the health care and related costs that would accrue from those diseases.

It is well-documented that almost all smokers take up the habit and become addicted before they are 21. The IM study found that raising the legal age to 21 would reduce the overall smoking rate within the population by 12 percent, whereas raising the age to 19 would reduce the overall rate by only 3 percent.

The Food and Drug Administration commissioned the study but it does not have the authority to set a legal purchase age nationwide. That is the purview of state and local governments. Four states have set the age at 19. New York City raised the age to 21 last year; Hawaii did so this year and California is expected to follow suit.

Needham, Mass. raised the age to 21 in 2005. According to a study in the journal *Tobacco Control*, smoking in Needham among those younger than 18 subsequently declined from 13 percent to just 7 percent, while smoking by people in that age group in nearby communities, where the legal age remained 18, declined only from 15 percent to 12 percent.

Although 18-year-olds are adults who can vote, join the military, drive, work at dangerous jobs and so on, they may not buy alcoholic beverages until they turn 21. Over the long haul, tobacco use is even more dangerous than drinking. Cigarettes and other tobacco products are the only consumer products that are lethal when used as intended by the manufacturers.

The state Legislature should begin the process of raising the legal age to 21.