

Advocates for raising the legal smoking age to 21 are finding traction

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The negative effects of smoking have been well documented in numerous studies. Doctors across the world treat patients who have suffered from the habit every day, but one such doctor has had enough. Dr. Daniel Ouellette, a pulmonologist at Henry Ford Hospital, is suggesting that the legal smoking age be raised to 21.

The suggestion, which is popular amongst anti-smoking advocates, would help limit access to tobacco products for teenagers. This, Ouellette says, would reduce smoking prevalence amongst younger demographics. Health problems related to smoking often start young, so this would be an important step.

“Most of my patients are diagnosed with emphysema or lung cancer at a relatively young age from smoking, despite the media attention given to the health risks of smoking and despite them knowing about those risks,” said Ouellette.

E-cigs not safer

Ouellette is also very against the notion that e-cigarettes are a safer product. “They’re unregulated so we can’t be

sure what's in them. In some studies, it showed that the particulates may be comparable to that of a regular cigarette," he said. "They also come from China, which makes it hard to know who is manufacturing them."

Unfortunately, many middle and high school students have latched onto the product. Statistics show that e-cigarette use amongst young people tripled between 2013 and 2014. And while the product is supposed to be safe, there have been hospitalizations related to using it. Conditions attributed to their use include pneumonia, congestive heart failure, and seizure.

Even if the above conditions do not manifest, some researchers say e-cigarettes can often act as a gateway product that leads to actual cigarette smoking – which is still responsible for one in five deaths in the United States.

One study, conducted and released by the Institute of Medicine in March of 2015, concluded that raising the legal age for using tobacco products would likely prevent or delay the start of smoking for adolescents and young adults. While this may seem obvious, it is extremely important since it would lower the prevalence of many age-related health problems associated with smoking.

Many cities and states already support raising the legal age of smoking. In June, Hawaii became the first state to raise the age required to buy tobacco products to 21; since then, 90 cities in 8 different states have followed their lead. Dr. Ouellette will be giving presentations on e-cigarettes and raising the legal age for tobacco products at the American College of Chest Physicians' annual meeting, which takes place in Montreal from October 24-28.

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