Mercury News editorial: California's smoking age increase is real progress

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"If a person has not smoked by the time they turn 21, the odds are 20-to-1 they never will."

-- R.J. Reynolds Tobacco researcher, 1982

It's no surprise why the tobacco industry fought so hard to keep California from raising the smoking age to 21 and treating electronic cigarettes the same as tobacco products. The courageous vote Thursday by the Assembly pushes California back toward the forefront of the anti-smoking movement and sets the stage for a dramatic showdown this November between Big Tobacco and the medical community. A coalition of doctors and anti-tobacco advocates is working to put a $2-per-pack cigarette tax increase before voters, taking the state from 35th in the nation to 9th on tax rates.

In 1988, California increased the tax on cigarettes by 25 cents a pack and used the money on a smoking prevention program. It worked, to the consternation of the tobacco industry. California cut the smoking rate for adults from 23 percent in 1988 to 12 percent in 2011, saving thousands of lives and driving down health care costs by billions of dollars.

The percentage of U.S. adults who smoke hovers at around 16 percent. California has higher rates in rural counties -- Shasta at 26.8 percent and Calaveras at 18.2 percent, for example. Los Angeles County's adult smoking rate is 14.2 percent.

But look at the Bay Area. In San Mateo County, only 7.7 percent of adults are smokers. In Santa Clara County it's 8.9 percent. Contra Costa County (11.8 percent) and Alameda County (11.9 percent) are higher but still below the state average. It's one reason for our region's healthy image.

Despite those numbers, the California Medical Association says tobacco addiction remains the No. 1 cause of preventable death in California. Tobacco-related diseases kill about 40,000 Californians every year, and the cost of their medical care exceeds $10 billion a year. Billion.

The state Senate is expected to approve the higher smoking age and e-cigarette legislation next week. Gov. Jerry Brown should sign the bills. The law can then take effect 90 days after the health care special session ends.

Research found that young people are more susceptible to smoking addiction because their brains are especially vulnerable to the effects of nicotine. That knowledge, coupled with the rise in e-cigarette use by young adults, is alarming. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released last year said e-cigarettes are the most popular nicotine product among teens. E-cigarette use among middle and high school students tripled from 4.5 percent in 2013 to 13.4 percent in 2014.

Stricter smoking laws take dead aim at this growing problem. And the Legislature's willingness to take on Big Tobacco bodes well for the tobacco tax increase -- needed to pay health care costs -- on the November ballot.