State should raise tobacco age to 21

KATIE GRUBER, CENTRACARE HEALTH FOUNDATION 3:16 p.m. CDT April 18, 2016

Did you know more than 90 percent of adult smokers start before age 18? Did you also know that tobacco remains public health’s No. 1 enemy?

Smoking and tobacco use continues to be a leading cause of preventable death and disease in our state. Each year, 5,100 Minnesotans die from tobacco-related illnesses. To ensure a steady stream of new tobacco users to replace those who die or quit, tobacco companies are continually seeking new, young users and hoping to addict them for life.

It is critical that we curb youth access to tobacco if we want to build healthier communities over time. One idea for decreasing the number of first-time users is to increase the age to purchase tobacco products to 21. Hawaii and several cities across the country have done so, and there are some early signs of success.

A recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine supports increasing the age to purchase tobacco. I hope here in Minnesota we can have a good discussion about how increasing the age to 21 can play a role in tobacco control efforts in our state.

Minnesota is already a national health leader. Raising the age to purchase tobacco to 21 could be an important next step in efforts to keep young people away from one of the biggest threats to their health.