

By Lynda Young, MD

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As I See It: Tobacco's human toll is heartbreaking

As a pediatrician, I feel one of the most important roles we play with our patients is teaching them about living a healthy lifestyle. As we know, habits developed when one is young can lead to a lifetime of health. Unfortunately, habits learned early like tobacco use have just the opposite effect.

That's why it's critical that we do everything we can to prevent young people from becoming addicted to nicotine and starting down a path that so often ends in serious diseases and premature death.

Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable illness and premature death in our state -- and it's costly. In Massachusetts, tobacco and nicotine use are responsible for an astronomical \$4 billion in health care costs annually.

But, it's the human toll that I find heartbreaking.

More than 9,000 Massachusetts residents die every year from tobacco-related disease. They are mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and yes, even our children. If we don't do something about it, 103,000 Massachusetts kids alive today will die prematurely from smoking.

Hundreds of local communities in Massachusetts have taken critical steps toward saving lives by making it harder for people, especially kids, to buy tobacco products and get addicted to nicotine. Some communities have raised the legal sale age of tobacco products to 21. Others prohibit the sale of tobacco in pharmacies. And many have worked to address the skyrocketing use by youth of electronic cigarettes by including these new products in tobacco laws.

These are common sense measures that should be the law throughout the Commonwealth—and lawmakers have just over a week to make that happen.

A bill pending on Beacon Hill --The Youth Tobacco Prevention bill (H 4361) -- aims to take these policies and make them part of a comprehensive law that aims to stem the tide of tobacco use across the entire state.

The bill would raise the tobacco age to 21, designate e-cigarettes as tobacco products and include them in the state's existing smoke-free workplace law, and prohibit the sale of tobacco in health care facilities such as pharmacies.

When you consider that 95 percent of adult smokers began before they were 21, it's easy to see how raising the sale age could help. If we keep young people from smoking before they turn 21, then most never will.

According to a report by the Institute of Medicine, raising the tobacco age to 21 would significantly reduce smoking and save lives.

There is so much at stake. The reality is that youth are particularly susceptible to nicotine addiction, and nicotine harms the developing brain. While collectively we have made progress in reducing youth tobacco use, these products continue to threaten the health of future generations.

Our state Senate has already passed the bill, 33-2, but it has to pass the House of Representatives for it to become law. And that has to happen by July 31. It's a small window, but a huge opportunity.

Lawmakers have a shot at ensuring a healthier future for our children, not to mention a significant reduction in health care costs.

Now is the time. House members should pass this legislation swiftly. The lives and futures of hundreds of thousands Massachusetts residents are on the line.

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