

Mego: Raising the tobacco-buying age in Naperville a no-brainer

 chicagotribune.com/suburbs/naperville-sun/ct-nvs-mego-column-cigarettes-st-0717-20160715-story.html

March 3, 5877521

A belief that apparently arose independently in several native North and Central American cultures was tobacco, because of its remarkable medicinal properties, was sacred and should be used sparingly. Overuse was considered a desecration, and as a result the body of the abuser would be damaged as punishment. They were, of course, absolutely right.

The Europeans, who were given the gift of tobacco in mid-October 1492, had no such religious reservations, and the plant has been abused ever since. Unfortunately, it took about 500 years for the wisdom of the Native Americans to work its way into the law governing the legal age to buy tobacco products.

Although children of any age may legally use tobacco in most parts of the United States, the age to purchase it is typically set at 18. Recently, California, Hawaii, New York and several cities across the country, including Chicago and Evanston, raised the purchase age to 21. Naperville's Liquor Commission is considering whether we should do the same.

Whether or not they recommend it, I believe the City Council should go ahead and raise the age. Frankly, I'd make it 50, but that's just me. Raising it to 21 would be fine, and to argue the point, let me refer to the incredible number of gun deaths we have each year.

Every year, about 32,000 people die in this country from firearms, with a little less than two-thirds of those being suicides and about 1 or 2 percent being mass shootings of four or more. People find that so upsetting that there is a serious movement to ban the sale of what are essentially farm rifles if they have been cosmetically disguised to appeal to wannabe Rambos.

Well, that's admittedly an appalling number of deaths. It hardly compares, however, to the 480,000 U.S. deaths every year caused by tobacco. In fact, secondhand smoke alone causes 42,000 deaths per year, 10,000 more deaths every year than are caused by all firearms.

And for every person who dies, there are approximately 30 more who live with smoking-related heart disease, lung disease, immune disorders and diabetes. They use about \$170 billion in direct medical expenditures and account for an additional \$150 billion a year in lost productivity.

Once the Affordable Care Act catches up with ailments that went untreated for many years, the growth in health spending should stay below 5 percent. Keeping young people from starting smoking until they're 21 could well drive the growth in health spending below the growth in GDP.

The only argument I've heard to not raise the age is because military service begins at 18. In fact, California allows active military members below 21 to purchase tobacco products. But tobacco manufacturers know that virtually all people addicted to nicotine began smoking or vaping before 21 because their immature brains are more susceptible to it. One in three of those will die as a result.

I suspect the reason military service typically begins at 18 is because the military brass likes that kids below 21 are more compliant and more likely to believe that silly nonsense about needing to break somebody's will before you can make them a warrior. So they take advantage of the fact that higher education has become largely unaffordable and there are few opportunities for someone 18 outside of military service. But this is a fixable situation.

Are the opponents of raising the age really arguing it is better to let kids smoke, sicken and die rather than to provide debt-free higher education and job training so they could decide when they reach 21 how they actually wanted to

spend their lives? Will we never learn the lesson the first Americans tried to teach us?

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