

Nevin Zablotsky: 21 reasons to pass Tobacco 21

 vtdigger.org /2017/10/11/nevin-zablotsky-21-reasons-pass-tobacco-21/

Oct 11
2017

Commentary

Editor's note: This commentary is by Nevin Zablotsky, DMD, a retired periodontist who practiced in South Burlington and who is now senior consultant on tobacco issues for [Nova Southeastern University Dental and Medical School](#).

After decades of scientific research, numerous U.S. surgeon general's reports, dedicated health advocates, and effective legal teams, there is finally a consensus in this country that the use of tobacco products is harmful to one's health. Even Big Tobacco now admits that the use of its products can kill you.

Despite this fact, most states, including Vermont, still believe that by the age of 18 an individual is wise enough to be given access to these deadly products, setting them on course for a lifetime of addiction.

There are at least 21 reasons to increase the age of purchasing tobacco products to 21:

1. Over the years, I have spoken to Vermont junior and senior high school students about the dangers of the use of tobacco products. I found that the main motivation for using cigarettes and smokeless tobacco was peer pressure and the desire to be cool. It has been estimated that 10,000 Vermont kids now under 18 will ultimately die prematurely from smoking.
2. Opponents of Tobacco 21 say that if you are old enough to vote you should be able to decide whether to smoke or not. Studies have shown that most smokers begin smoking during adolescence, and the exposure to nicotine during this period impairs the developing brain. Are we willing to watch kids' brains be compromised for decisions they make before they turn 21?
3. It has been shown that nearly everyone who buys cigarettes for minors in the U.S. is under 21 years of age. Raising the smoking age prevents high school students from buying tobacco for their peers.
4. Half of adult smokers become regular smokers before the age of 18 and four out of five become regular users before they reach the age of 21.
5. Opponents of Tobacco 21 argue that if you are old enough to serve in the military you are old enough to use tobacco. During World War II, tobacco companies provided soldiers and sailors cigarettes in their rations and hooked an entire generation on nicotine. In the 1980s, the Department of Defense increased health promotion efforts and set in place programs to curb tobacco use in personnel. It was shown that soldiers who smoked exercised less, performed more poorly on physical fitness tests, and were less successful in combat training. In 2016, the Vermont National Guard testified that it would voluntarily comply with a Vermont Tobacco 21 law.
- 6-14. It has been proven that smoking causes cancer of the throat, mouth, esophagus, trachea, lung, blood, stomach, liver, pancreas, kidney, cervix, bladder, colon and rectum. Vermont spends \$348 million each year in tobacco-related health care costs.
15. As a result of reductions in adult smoking from 2001-2014, the state saved \$1.4 billion in smoking-related health costs.
- 16-20. Passing Tobacco 21 would spare kids from contracting many chronic diseases.
21. The National Academy of Medicine states that an increase in the purchase age of tobacco products would have an immediate effect in improving maternal/fetal and infant outcomes.

Tobacco 21 legislation has passed the Vermont House but was recently rejected by the Senate. As we approach the 2018 session of the Vermont Legislature I want to appeal to the 16 senators who opposed this bill to look into their hearts, look at the children of Vermont, and think about how much suffering they can prevent by passing Tobacco 21 if it is reintroduced in the next legislative session. The decisions they make will have major consequences for generations to come, and I hope when they are old and gray and look back on what they have accomplished in their lives, I would like them to smile and say they made a difference in improving the quality of life for all Vermonters.

* As of this writing, California, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey and Oregon have raised the age of the sale of tobacco to 21 along with New York City, Boston and Chicago.