Report from 2013 Protecting Children and Families from Tobacco: Leadership Advocacy Training

From April 26-27, I attend the workshop sponsored by a collaboration of the ACP, AAP, AAFP, ACOG and AMA in Washington, DC. The two-fold purpose was to remind doctors that smoking is still the number 1 cause of preventable death in this country at the cost of 440,000 lives per year, and to counteract disturbing new trends in the struggle to reduce those deaths.

The reduction of smoking rates in the US from 42% to less than 20% in 2010 marks one of the great public health victories of our time. Closer inspection of the trends reveals that the rate of decline has plateaued since 2004, though. The gains are generally attributed to cigarette taxes, greater awareness of smoking related illness, indoor smoking restrictions and reduced social acceptance of smoking in general. So what might have changed? The tobacco industry has evolved new products and new marketing techniques to circumvent the most effective of these techniques. Specifically, smokeless tobacco products.

If you have not yet heard of snus, or of dissolvable tobacco “orbs”, sticks or strips, then you are like me before this conference and you will now, like me, see them everywhere. Tobacco is even back on TV now – the Blu electronic cigarette was featured in a Super Bowl ad. They are not subject to cigarette taxes, smoking bans or marketing restrictions. So they come in all shapes, sizes and flavors, which makes them perfect to target to children. We probably all remember the industry’s Joe Camel ad campaigns. The same marketing geniuses have already come up with fruit flavored smokeless products that come in packages meant to look like a cell phone, breath mints or even specifically like candy containers. Remember ‘candy cigarettes’? Meet bubble-gum flavored hookah tobacco.

Perhaps most insidious is the tobacco industry’s effort to co-opt the language of harm-reduction for their lobbying and marketing efforts. It is important to recognize that they have not submitted any of these products to the FDA for review but they are being promoted as safe and healthy alternatives. The campaigns are eerily reminiscent of their efforts to promote ‘light’ products in response to early concerns about smoking related health problems while being fully aware that they were no safer. The industry is marketing these new products by promoting “dual use” allowing users to circumvent smoking bans and lesson the need to kick their nicotine addiction. Additionally, these products do not have the same marketing restrictions allowing for the Super Bowl and youth-focused ads. The youth focus is so important to the industry because >80% of smokers start before age 21 and after age 21 a non-smoker has only a 4% chance of becoming a smoker. Do not forget that there is a lot of money at stake here – in 2010 the six leading tobacco companies had profits as large as Coca-Cola, Microsoft and McDonalds combined.
The conference was not intended just to raise the alarm, but to equip us to return to our states to spread the message and with a tool kit. The tool kit focuses on doubling down on proven strategies that work, such as extending smoking bans in any and all communities that don’t yet have them and targeting smoking in multi-unit housing complexes. But to meet new challenges it will require new techniques. These new strategies such as expansion of tobacco taxes to cover all products, targeting tobaccos sales in pharmacies (the only growing retail outlet), and increasing the purchase age to 21 to get tobacco products completely out of schools will require more public education to generate more political will.

Now that I am home in New Mexico I will be reaching out to state leaders and other professional societies to find out what efforts are currently underway in our state. I am also, of course, a resource to any member of the chapter interested in learning more or getting involved on this issue to keep our communities healthy.

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