

Common Sense

"It's illegal to burn leaves outdoors. How come people are burning leaves indoors where I work?"

Jeff May, school teacher, New Jersey

Individuals and organizations may be apprehensive about creating smokefree air policies. There are several possible reasons: Society has allowed smoking considerable social respectability; cigarettes are one of the most heavily advertised products; the tobacco industry is a powerful political force; and smoking, like any addiction, is difficult to deal with in a sensible manner.

Common sense is an important American value, and it can be valuable in effecting change. The tobacco industry attempts to thwart smokefree policies by challenging the results of scientific studies or twisting the issue into one of civil liberties to distract attention from the public health problem. Policy makers can counter these tactics by helping people employ their common sense: People know that clean air is better than dirty air, that smoking kills, that freedom of choice is better than involuntary smoking.

To help decision makers overcome hesitation, to change attitudes about tobacco, and to increase acceptance of smokefree air policies, here are some common sense perspectives.

Re-thinking the Status Quo

It is difficult to look objectively at something that is part of the status quo.

The scenario below offers an adventure in attitude role-playing, a chance to see the status quo in a new light:

A representative of Life Cigarette Company comes to a manager saying, "We'd like to market our product in your company. It comes in these nifty packets with pretty designs and fancy wrappings. This is an American agricultural product. Our Founding Fathers grew it; our country was sustained by it in our earliest days. It contains no calories, fat, or cholesterol. It's low in sugar. We will supply machines to dispense the product conveniently to your employees and customers.

"Of course...one-third of your employees who use our product will get heart disease and one out of ten of the users will suffer lung cancer, a disease that was almost unheard of before our product. Users will be absent from work twice as frequently as nonusers. Half of all long-term users will die prematurely because they consume our product. People using our product also will make nonusers ill and will make them angry. Nonusing employees or customers, who are in the majority, may sue you for protection from our product. Pollution from our product will damage delicate electronic equipment in your company. You will have more fires. Carpets will be burned. There will be increased ventilation problems."

Hazardous Substances

Tobacco smoke can be compared to other substances in the environment, using



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standards applied to other toxins. It is not completely known what is in cigarette smoke. Tobacco companies have eluded federal laws and regulations requiring disclosure of ingredients. As John Banzhaf, Professor of Law at George Washington University and Executive Director of Action on Smoking and Health, says, "I could go out tomorrow and manufacture a cigarette made of tobacco, saccharin, arsenic, and horse manure, and I'd be subject to almost no government regulation." (In August 1996, Massachusetts became the first state to require tobacco companies to disclose the ingredients and nicotine yield levels of their products.)

Among the constituents of tobacco smoke that have been identified, the two best known are carbon monoxide and nicotine. The American Lung Association reports that an office worker sitting next to a two-pack-a-day smoker is exposed to carbon monoxide levels twice as high as allowed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in industrial settings. Nicotine is almost omnipresent in the blood and other bodily fluids of nonsmokers. (Please see the Health section for more information.) Ammonia, used in toilet cleaners, and hydrogen cyanide, used in gas chambers, are present in tobacco smoke. If judged by the standards applied to other environmental toxins, tobacco smoke would be deemed a hazardous substance.

Employee, Student Assistance Programs

Administrators respond to other health problems and other drug addictions that affect their employees, students, or customers. They offer inoculation, education, incentives for good health choices, testing, and drug withdrawal programs. One of the most important lessons communicated in those programs is that people who allow others to continue their addictions are enablers of addiction. Organizations without smokefree air policies are enablers of nicotine addiction.

Providing for Citizens Who Have Disabilities

Workplaces and public places provide special facilities, ramps and wheelchair-accessible toilets, for people with disabilities. Often it's very expensive to provide these accommodations. However, another group of individuals with disabilities is overlooked: People with health problems such as asthma or heart disease are at risk in a smoke-filled environment. Ironically, they could be accommodated at little or no expense.

Freedom of Choice

Jacquelyn Rogers, the founder of Smokenders, recognizes that smoking is compulsive. But she points out that



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breathing is involuntary. A smoker can use alternative nicotine delivery systems, postpone a smoke, refrain from smoking, step outside to smoke, or choose to become a nonsmoker. A nonsmoker cannot choose to refrain from breathing for an hour in a restaurant or eight hours at work.

A Legal Product?

Tobacco industry spokespeople argue that tobacco is a legal product. The "legitimacy" of tobacco needs some rethinking. If tobacco were a new product, it would not be allowed to be introduced into commerce today, given what is known about it. If decision makers were hindered by history, there would never be change and improvement. Child labor and slavery would still be legal.

Tobacco is really a quasi-legal product. Special licenses are required to sell it. Cigarettes can't be advertised on the airwaves. Some jurisdictions have banned billboards and other tobacco promotions. The FDA has promulgated controls on tobacco marketing. It's illegal to sell tobacco to minors. Tobacco use is forbidden in many places.

A more accurate statement is that tobacco is a dangerous, controlled substance like alcohol and firearms. Indeed, the federal government groups them together in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

The Parallel with Alcohol

Alcohol and tobacco, the most widely used drugs, are the most destructive drugs. A useful parallel exists in the process of change society is pursuing about alcohol. There is a growing awareness about how destructive alcohol is and changes are underway to reduce its harmful impact. Legislatures are raising the drinking age and increasing penalties for drunken driving. Employers are offering more treatment programs for alcohol-addicted employees and eliminating the use of alcohol at company parties. People are being urged to provide nonalcoholic drinks at parties and to say "No" to friends who want to drive when drunk.

Similarly, society is recognizing that tobacco's toll is much greater than previously thought. Communities are stepping up efforts to ensure that children remain nonusers, and that nonsmokers are protected from secondhand smoke. Employers and managers of public places are creating smokefree policies. People are eliminating ashtrays from their homes and putting up signs saying "Welcome to another smokefree home."