



April 18, 2003

**DAILY OKLAHOMAN 'POINT OF VIEW' REGARDING INCREASING  
CIGARETTE TAX**

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**Commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services**

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death in Oklahoma. Surely, we as a state are smart enough to do whatever it takes to save lives. Increasing the tax on cigarettes will do this. This single act will save thousands of lives and significantly decrease societal costs for treating tobacco-related illnesses.

Is it simply an individual's right to smoke? No. It's something that affects all of us, because each taxpayer pays for the resulting increased cost for treatment and care. Is it unfair to have the smoker pay an increased tax? No. Shouldn't these individuals who choose to place themselves at risk share the increased burden for their own future health care?

Cigarettes are killing Oklahoma's future. A report just released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cites Oklahoma as one of the top three states with the most smokers, in company with Kentucky and West Virginia.

Nearly 29 percent of our adult population – some 600,000 Oklahomans – smoke. Another 57,000 state high school and middle school students smoke. These figures don't even include the thousands of Oklahomans who indulge in smokeless tobacco.

Why are we concerned? It's clear. Because cigarette smoking is addictive. It results in death and it affects the overall health of our state. In addition to those who already smoke,

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our state's youth are picking up the habit in droves. Every year, nearly 9,500 Oklahoma kids become addicted to nicotine and another 20,000 experiment with tobacco. Of those who become addicted to tobacco, one-third of them will die prematurely of a tobacco related disease.

For a state so concerned with protecting our children, why are we willing to sacrifice these young lives and the thousands of lives lost every year simply because we're unwilling to raise the cigarette tax?

The anomaly here is that among Oklahomans who use tobacco, 75 percent of adults and 50 percent of middle and high school youth say they *want* to quit.

Raising the tax would help them do that.

Research shows that increasing cigarette prices by 10 percent reduces adult cigarette consumption by 3-5 percent and youth smoking by 6-7 percent.

In our opinion, cigarette taxes should be hiked considerably from the 23 cents per pack currently levied. Dozens of other states are raising cigarette taxes to help offset the tremendous medical costs associated with nicotine addiction and to spur reduction in smoking. In 2002, 20 states initiated cigarette tax increases. Several other states, besides Oklahoma, are working to raise taxes this year. Nationally, the average state cigarette tax is 67 cents per pack, a figure that rises to

75 cents per pack for non-tobacco-producing states. For states bordering Oklahoma, the average state tax on cigarettes is nearly 60 cents.

Health-care costs related to smoking are draining our Medicaid system. In Oklahoma, tobacco use costs Oklahomans more than \$2 billion in medical expenses and lost productivity every year, an average of \$600 per person.

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Thousands of our citizens – nearly 6,000 to be exact – die every year due to tobacco-related illnesses, with another 750 dying from illnesses caused by exposure to secondhand smoke.

Raising the cigarette tax would be a win-win situation for Oklahoma. By funneling revenue into our ailing Medicaid system, establishing additional tobacco cessation programs and funding a state-of-the-art cancer center, we can begin plugging some of the holes tobacco has burned into our system. The real issue, however, is giving the hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans who want to quit smoking an incentive to do so, and discouraging those who are considering taking on this life-threatening addiction.

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