Discuss: Should We Raise The Minimum Age On Smoking?

By Ana-Marija Dolaskie — October 30, 2015

America is all about freedom but individual freedom has its limits, especially when it impacts society in general. And the health consequences of smoking have a huge impact on society. Since smoking skews more heavily toward poor people, that means the burden in an Obamacare world will be shouldered by taxpayers, the vast majority of whom do not smoke.

For that reason, it makes sense to wonder if raising the minimum age to buy cigarettes make sense. The American Academy of Pediatrics is advocating an increase in the minimum age nationwide to 21 for all tobacco products [1].

The reason is simple. Youth is a time of experimentation but when it comes to addictive products, like cigarettes, experimentation can be deadly. It's one of the reasons The National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 was implemented.

Who says a minimum drinking age does not work? College students [2], even though the law signed by President Ronald Reagan did just what was intended - it reduced teenage deaths from car accidents involving alcohol [3]. So they don't think a higher smoking age will do anything more than create "casual criminals" like alcohol limits or bans on marijuana have done.

Regardless, a raise in the smoking age is on the table. Earlier this year, Hawaii Governor David Ige signed a bill to raise the minimum smoking age to 21, the first state to do so. That law goes into effect January 1, 2016. Some cities and counties, including New York City, have already raised the smoking age to 21.

And the health argument is compelling. Smoking is the leading cause of premature deaths and preventable diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, heart disease, and many cancers. A push for education and stricter regulation in the past few decades has led to a serious decline in cigarette smoking. But will an age increase keep teens from lighting up? Let's consider both sides:
The arguments for raising the smoking age to 21:

We know that most people who smoke started in their teens. Even though fewer teens are smoking cigarettes than ever before, it's evident that youth is a time of experimentation. It's also a time when teenagers' brains are still developing, so those between the ages 15 and 17 are most vulnerable to getting addicted to cigarettes. Between the ages of 18 and 21 is when experimentation with tobacco stops, and daily smoking begins.

In March, a study from the Institute of Medicine found that setting a new minimum age nationwide would result in almost 250,000 fewer premature deaths, and 50,000 fewer deaths from lung cancer. Moreover, the estimated smoking rates would fall to 12 percent.

The arguments against raising the smoking age to 21:

It may be fixing a problem that is being solved, thanks to groups like the American Council on Science and Health, which has advocated against smoking for 37 years. Smoking is already trending down so creating a "black market" among teens may not be the optimal solution. The CDC points out that last year, 18 percent of Americans smoked, down from 21 percent in 2009, and nearly 25 percent in 1997. The decline has nothing to do with age limits, it has to do with awareness campaigns like we have created, and in a lesser sense is due to things like higher cigarette taxes and smoke-free buildings.

Some counter that raising the age from 18 to 21 won't make a difference in smokers, many of whom started lighting up far earlier, at age 15 or 16.

Children aged 12 are allowed to shoot a deer with a rifle. Before they are 21 they can vote and fight in wars, so they should be considered mature enough to decide whether or not to buy cigarettes.

The reality is that the science and health issue is settled. Smoking is bad. So at this point smoking is an IQ test and don't want to "make the perfect the enemy of the good" and make smoking a rebellious rite of passage. Some people are going to engage in foolish behavior [legally or illegally] and for those people, an age increase or a tobacco ban won't make a difference. It just makes criminals wealthy, as we have seen in the War on Drugs.

We want to hear your thoughts. Should the minimum smoking age be increased or not? Leave your comments below.

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