

Cigarette tax saves lives

Smoke clouds senators' sense

The Senate Finance Committee is going to be talking cents this week. Eight cents. Sixteen cents. Thirty-two cents. With any luck, they may even be talking common sense.



Ellen Goodman

The subject on the table — no ashtrays please — is smoking and taxes. The question is whether the Congress will lower, raise or maintain the excise tax on cigarettes.

At the moment, the tax rate is 16 cents per pack. This is relatively less than in 1951. But if the Congress does nothing, on Oct. 1 the figure will be halved, with eight cents chopped off the consumer price tag.

In the larger scheme of things, eight cents doesn't mean a heck of a lot. But — this is beginning to sound like a line from "Pajama Game" — give it to the government on every pack, 30 billion packs a year and it adds up to nearly \$2.5 billion.

As you might imagine, it is an odd moment in deficit financing to go looking for ways to take several billion out of the federal treasury. This is a tax that is actually popular. In a Yankelovich poll, more than three-quarters of the U.S. public chose cigarette taxes as their favorite way to raise money for the deficit. That included smokers.

It is an even more peculiar moment for the government to be actively promoting such a deadly habit. A study by the Office of Technological Assessment estimates that Americans spend \$62 billion a year on diseases caused by smoking. Smoking is lethal. Why push it with a discount?

In fairness, cigarette consumption among adults doesn't rise or fall with the price tag. Few adults stop smoking

just because the cost has gone up. Even when adult smokers know the real price the cigarettes are exacting on their lungs, smoking is a brutal addiction to conquer.

But there is solid evidence that cost has an effect on the youngest consumers who aren't yet hooked. The typical American who leaves high school as a confirmed smoker picks up the habit in junior high when money is toughest. The older you get, the less likely you are to start smoking.

If we cut the cigarette tax and the price per pack goes down, The Institute for the Study of Smoking Behavior and Policy at Harvard estimates that a million young people between the ages of 12 and 25 would begin, or continue, smoking.

When you figure the long-term health effects of this tax policy, Kenneth Warner of the University of Michigan's School of Public Health says bluntly, "If that tax is allowed to fall in half, upwards of half-a-million Americans will die earlier than if the tax had been left at 16 cents."

The House Ways and Means Committee has already voted to keep the 16-cent tax. Things are less certain in the Senate, especially since Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole is in favor of a return to the eight-cent rule. But the most attractive of the Senate bills under consideration this week would go in the anti-Dole, anti-Helms, anti-tobacco lobby direction. They would raise the tax to 32 cents.

One such bill would earmark part of the new money for health education and part for Medicare. This is an attractive notion since some \$5 billion in Medicare/Medicaid bills annually can be attributed to smoking. Cigarette smokers would prepay a piece of their future health costs with each drag. It's a pay-as-you-puff program.

But again, the greatest appeal is not in terms of raising revenue, but in discouraging smoking. The same studies show that any 16-cent increase would likely diminish the number of teen-age smokers by 17 percent or 820,000.

"In general," says Kenneth Warner, "I don't like the idea of using tax policy to influence behavior. But consider the behavior. We're dealing with a highly addictive process. Ninety percent of adults say they'd like to quit if it were easy to do so; 60 percent claim they have tried within the past year."

He sees a subtle "educational" value in a major tax rise. "I'm an economist. We talk about market failure. People do not understand the results of the market behavior called smoking. By raising the dollar price, we're providing information. We're saying, 'This is costly.' That's not just in dollars; that's in terms of health implications too."

It seems unlikely that we'll get our 32-cents-worth out of the current Senate session. The habit some senators have acquired of caving in to the tobacco lobby is addictive. But at the very least, they should maintain the current 16 cents. It's one tax that's certifiably good for our health.

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Goodman is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the Boston Globe.

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Letters...

Stunned by 'filth'

The filth that came from the student section following a questionable call by the officials at the Sept. 7 football game, should never be repeated.

I was stunned and so disgusted with what I heard. It was hard to believe that Tom Osborne — our national treasure — should have to be identified

with such pigs.

And the drummers who lead them should be severely reprimanded. They certainly can be identified.

Helen Abdouch
Omaha

— Originally submitted to Bob Devaney, athletic director.

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