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# DR. LAURA SCHARF: State lawmakers should vote to raise tobacco age to 21

In the nearly 20 years I’ve been a practicing pediatrician, things certainly have changed in the everyday lives of kids.

What hasn’t changed is that kids are vulnerable to peer pressure, they want to fit in, and they sometimes make bad choices. And so, despite herculean efforts to combat the influence of the tobacco industry and shouting from rooftops the dangers of tobacco use, we still see kids starting to smoke at a young age.

That is why we need to do everything in our power to keep cigarettes and other tobacco products out of the hands of kids. Raising the age of sale for tobacco from 18 to 21 in Massachusetts is an exceptionally good place to start.

A bill to do just that has been proposed in the Massachusetts Legislature, and it is my strong hope that lawmakers are able to pass it this session. I can’t emphasize enough what a smart move this is for the health and safety of the adolescents I see in my office each day.

You might wonder how raising the age from 18 to 21 is going to impact younger kids, but the 15- to 17-year-old age group is actually the exact target of this legislation. We know that kids get cigarettes and other tobacco products from older kids. In a recent survey of 10th-graders, nearly two-thirds said it’s “easy” to get cigarettes.

It’s no wonder that each year in Massachusetts, an estimated 2,800 youths become smokers. By eliminating the network of older buyers supplying younger kids, we have a chance to put a dent in that statistic. We can’t allow it to be “easy” for young people to make the wrong choice and begin a lifelong and potentially deadly addiction.

When people start smoking at a younger age, it’s more likely they’ll become long-term smokers. Nicotine is highly addictive, and more so to younger, still-growing bodies and brains. Studies have shown that exposure to nicotine in these years can have long-term impact on brain development.

As a health care provider, I feel fortunate to practice in a state where health care has long been a priority. And Massachusetts is a leader in efforts to curb tobacco use. The idea of raising the tobacco age is not new here. At latest count, more than 150 individual municipalities have done so. Here in Quincy, a bill before the city council introduced by at-large Councilor Noel DiBona would put our city on that list. The mayor has indicated that he will sign it if it passes. That would be a great achievement, but it’s also time it became standard statewide.

On top of the Tobacco 21 measures, Senate 1218 and House 2864, the legislation includes measures to add e-cigarettes to the existing smoke-free workplace law, and it would prohibit health care facilities such as pharmacies from selling tobacco products.

Massachusetts needs to remain a leader in tobacco prevention. We need to take the cue from our local leaders and enact statewide Tobacco 21 legislation.

I urge all lawmakers in Massachusetts to support this bill. The risk is too high, the health implications too dangerous, for us not to act. Now is the time to change the course for kids at risk of this dreadful addiction.

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