Regulate tobacco

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The welcome reduction in cigarette smoking in recent decades - a 50 percent decline since U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry first warned of the cancer-causing dangers of tobacco in 1964 - is credited with saving millions from smoking-related deaths. It is, in fact, one of the top public health achievements of the last century.

But in recent years that remarkable progress has stalled. The nation's overall smoking rate has flattened and the teenage smoking rate remains alarmingly high.

A big reason is the big-dollar marketing campaigns by Big Tobacco. Campaigns that promote flavored cigarettes that might particularly appeal to young people. Campaigns that market new smokeless products as a way to satisfy a smoker's urge in places where smoking is prohibited. Campaigns that make unproven or deceptive claims that a particular product is safer than traditional cigarettes. All told, tobacco companies spend more than $13 billion on marketing each year, 22 times greater than the anti-smoking efforts by the 50 states combined.

Finally, after years of struggle, Congress is seemingly poised to bring some reality to the marketplace.

This week, a House committee is expected to begin work on legislation that would for the first time give clear authority to the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco. The legislation would do a lot of things, but, with its most important provisions, it would give the agency broad power to curtail marketing practices that target teens and the deceptive marketing claims that certain tobacco products are somehow safe.

Similar bills have passed the Senate twice before. With 56 co-sponsors in the 100-member chamber, the Senate will almost certainly pass again. House action has been blocked in the past, but the bill now has 218 cosponsors, a bare majority, so prospects there are also good.

Reps. Susan Davis and Bob Filner, both California Democrats, are among the House cosponsors. Unfortunately absent from the list are California Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter, Brian Bilbray and Darrel Issa. Whatever their reasons, they are not good enough.

And here's why, in facts reported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other experts:

Smoking damages nearly every organ in the human body, potentially leading to heart and lung disease, numerous cancers and a host of other medical tragedies. Tobacco use claims 438,000 lives every year. Every day, more than 1,100 young people become addicted to tobacco, and more than half of them will ultimately die prematurely from a tobacco-related disease. Smoking is responsible for $75 billion in direct medical costs each year, and $92 billion more in lost productivity. If tobacco were some unstoppable virus it would be bad enough. But it is worse than that, because the illness and death tobacco causes are preventable. Congress must pass this landmark legislation, and President Bush must sign it.

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