

Smokefree Workplaces Will Benefit All

by By Susan Allan, M.D., J.D., M.

No one should be required to breathe unhealthy air as a condition of employment.

Yet for the 35,000 Oregonians who work in places where indoor smoking is allowed, inhaling toxic fumes is an unavoidable part of the job.

U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona has released a comprehensive new report that definitively concludes that secondhand smoke is a killer and must be addressed as a serious hazard to public health. "The debate is over," Carmona said as he presented the findings. "The science is clear. Secondhand smoke is not a mere annoyance, but a serious public health hazard."

Studies have shown that simply breathing secondhand smoke for as little as 30 minutes can cause blood vessels to constrict and raise the risk of heart attack or stroke. Secondhand smoke is responsible for lung cancer in non-smokers, for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and for respiratory illness and asthma in children.

It is now clear that even minimal exposure to secondhand smoke should be avoided. Most of us have a choice about that exposure. But what about those who work six, eight or even 10-hour shifts in bars and restaurant/bar combinations where smoking is allowed?

Here in Oregon we are working on many fronts to keep Oregonians healthy. But when it comes to secondhand smoke, we are not succeeding. Secondhand smoke kills an estimated 800 Oregon non-smokers every year.

There is a solution. Oregonians can decide to protect their friends and families from this hazardous exposure. We can demand that all workplaces become smokefree. By simply requiring that people step outside to have their cigarettes, we can protect the health of 35,000 working Oregonians. Such a simple action on behalf of public health, such a little change that can improve the health of so many.

Many communities across the country have gone "smokefree" in all worksites. Their businesses have found that the change costs them nothing and can even improve their bottom line in a number of ways, such as smaller insurance premiums due to a lower risk of fires and injuries, reduced cleaning and maintenance costs and healthier employees and higher productivity.

There are also benefits for employees who smoke. Experience shows that when a workplace goes smokefree, employees who smoke often decide to quit, improving their health and that of their families. This helps reduce future smoking rates as well -- when children and teens are exposed to less smoking, they are less likely to become smokers themselves.

Currently more than 80 percent of adult Oregonians do not smoke. It is past time to take the next step to reduce exposure to tobacco smoke for Oregonians. Let's work together to require that all workplaces become 100 percent smokefree.

After all, shouldn't everyone be able to breathe clean air while they are on the job?

Susan Allan, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., leads Oregon's public health system and oversees public health programs in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division.

Smokefree Workplaces Will Benefit All by Susan Allan, M.D., J.D., M.