

LETTERS

Raise the Smoking Age to 21?

March 12, 2016

Proponents raise health arguments, while opponents discuss the age of adulthood.

To the Editor: Re “Raise the Legal Age for Cigarette Sales” (editorial, March 6):

Big Tobacco and its proxies often say, “If someone is old enough to fight in the United States military, he or she is old enough to smoke.” But maximizing individual freedom means the opposite. Nicotine enslaves smokers in their addiction, leaving most of them unable to quit despite numerous attempts. That’s why most current smokers advocate a minimum legal sales age of 21 for tobacco products.

Moreover, recent neuroscience research indicates that nicotine acts as a gateway drug by rewiring the adolescent brain to make heroin, cocaine and other opioids more addictive.

The leaders of more than 100 cities and towns in Massachusetts have formally voted to adopt a minimum legal sales age of 21 (MLSA 21). Adults should be free to choose, but Big Tobacco should not be free to entice our children into a lethal addiction through cigarettes, nor through e-cigarettes and other new tobacco products that are cheap, sweet and far too accessible.

KEN FARBSTEIN

Needham, Mass.

The writer was the grass-roots campaign coordinator for Tobacco Free Mass through December 2015.

To the Editor: If saving lives is the ultimate goal of public policy, then in addition to disenfranchising younger adults from buying tobacco products, shouldn’t we revoke the driving privileges of all senior citizens over the age of 70, given that group’s increased likelihood for accidents? And as long as you are sanctioning demographic profiling as a means to an end, why stop at age? I imagine that laws could be passed restricting a variety of individual activities based on a person’s gender, race or sexual orientation, if it was perceived to be in the public good.

A far smarter approach to tobacco policy would be to continue minimizing the visibility and appeal of tobacco products in society. In Canada, cigarettes must be sold from under the counter; in Australia, they are sold in plain packaging. Many countries — but not the United States — have national bans on smoking in public spaces. Such policies, in addition to higher tobacco taxes, would be far more effective in combating the scourge of smoking than engaging in blanket age discrimination.

ALEX CABOT

Boston

To the Editor: The scientific evidence for the bill raising the legal smoking age to 21 in California is strong and is based on an Institute of Medicine report. There is no similar body of evidence that would support the other bill before the governor, which would classify electronic cigarettes as tobacco products.

Many of the recent declines in smoking are attributed to the use of electronic cigarettes. The majority of individuals who take up e-cigarettes do so in order to reduce their risk of tobacco-related disease. E-cigarette use has been shown to promote additional attempts by smokers to quit, and half the users experience significant reductions in the

amount smoked. In England, the National Health Service has recently initiated programs to dispense e-cigarettes for these purposes.

Increased restrictions on electronic cigarettes, other than limiting sales to young people, are contrary to public health and the public interest.

EDWARD ANSELM

New York

The writer is an assistant professor of medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, a senior fellow at R Street Institute, a research organization, and medical director of Health Republic Insurance of New Jersey.

To the Editor: Your editorial “Raise the Legal Age for Cigarette Sales” misses the harder issue. The real question is: What is the age of adulthood in the United States?

If the answer really is 18, then depriving 18-year-old adults of access to lawful products generally available to other adults — even when these products are harmful, as cigarettes certainly are — raises equal protection problems, is unfair to them and is an unwise social policy to boot in that it perpetuates a later childhood than needed. Treat all adults equally.

MICHAEL J. BROYDE

Atlanta

The writer is a professor at Emory University School of Law and teaches family law.

To the Editor: Cigarette smoking kills more than 480,000 Americans each year, including more than 41,000 nonsmokers who die from secondhand smoke, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Raising the legal age for purchasing tobacco products to 21 will deter many young people from becoming smokers, saving hundreds of thousands from dying prematurely from lung cancer, heart disease, stroke and emphysema, and their families the incomprehensible grief of losing loved ones to preventable diseases. However, this should be only one part of a multipronged effort to deter young people from smoking, along with raising taxes on tobacco products and increasing funding for antismoking programs.

In 1988, California voters approved Proposition 99, which increased state cigarette taxes and earmarked funds for health education to deter tobacco use, including an aggressive media campaign. From 1988 to 2010, California’s smoking rate plunged from 22.7 percent to 11.9 percent. During the first 15 years of its tobacco control program, California spent \$1.8 billion; its return on this modest investment was an estimated \$86 billion in smoking-related health care costs averted, along with saving more than 1 million lives.

This is a deeply personal issue for me, as my mother and father, Phoebe and Samuel Silver, both died of smoking-related diseases.

STEPHEN A. SILVER

San Francisco

To the Editor: Raising the legal age for cigarette sales will result in even more out-of-work New Yorkers selling street corner cigarette known as “loosies” (usually 2 for \$1) to make ends meet. Excessive taxes on cigarettes along with raising the legal age of consumption from 18 to 21 will continue to result in a growing market to purchase cigarettes one or two at a time.

Citizens have more to fear from murder, arson, rape, muggings, robberies, auto and identity theft or home break-ins than individuals who sell loosies or consumer tobacco products. Law enforcement authorities, including the police and courts, should pursue those who commit real crimes against citizens and property rather than enforcing insane

laws outlawing the sale of cigarettes to those under 21.

At 18, you are old enough to serve in the military, die for your country, drive a car, get married, own a home, sign a lease, obtain credit cards, vote and have a drink. Why not also be able to continue smoking legally?

LARRY PENNER

Great Neck, N.Y.