

The Nicotine Challenger

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A View From The Director

Spring is here (at last!) and as usual that means it is state budget time around the country. It has now become part of this tradition that people with an interest in reducing tobacco-caused death and disease, and particularly those receiving state support, start to make their case for continued existence and to scan the newspapers for clues as to whether they might be out of a job in the next few months. In last year's budget, New Jersey increased its cigarette tax by 55 cents per pack (an excellent move), but like many other states, also slashed the funding for tobacco control by \$20 million (by 67%).

New Jersey's new budget plan for the Fiscal Year 2005 (starting July 2004) proposes to increase the tax per pack of cigarettes by 45 cents (an increase from \$2.05 per pack to \$2.50 per pack, New Jersey State tax). It is estimated that this increase will generate an additional \$135 million in revenue (making the revenue from cigarette taxes for the year July 2004 to June 2005 total over \$900 million). The 2004-5 budget also proposes to increase the funding for New Jersey's Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program (CTCP) for 2004-5 by \$1million (from \$10 to \$11 million).

I would like to take this opportunity to comment on the proposed 2005 budget:

1. Tobacco addiction is by far the biggest cause of premature death and preventable disease in New Jersey (see Figure 1. for comparisons with other causes), but both the current and proposed funding for activities to prevent tobacco-caused harm remain woefully inadequate.
2. Increasing the cigarette tax by 45 cents is an excellent policy. In addition to raising much needed revenue, it will help motivate more of New Jersey's smokers to try to quit. At our clinic we have seen increased numbers wanting help to quit, partly as a result of previous tax increases (see Figure 2). The tax increase will also lower

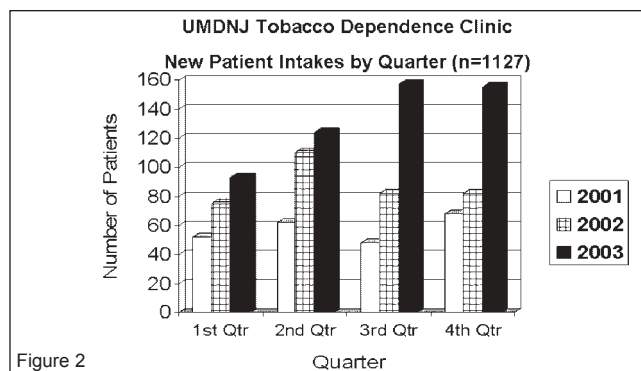


Figure 2

the access, rate of use, and consequent addiction to tobacco by young people. It will result in thousands of people living longer, healthier lives and will result in millions of dollars in healthcare costs being saved.

3. As cigarette taxes increase, some New Jersey citizens are switching to or initiating use of lower taxed but equally harmful products, e.g. cigars (including teenagers, the age-group with the highest cigar use prevalence). The tax rate on non-cigarette tobacco products, such as cigars, should be restored from its current level (30%) to at least its pre-2002 level of 48%.
4. New Jersey's Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program is an effective and successful program. It has succeeded in reducing both youth and adult smoking prevalence by more than 15% over the past few years. The demand for treatment services has grown and can be expected to increase with another tax hike. Therefore, New Jersey's comprehensive program should be funded at the CDC recommended minimum levels, as written in to the legislation of the Fiscal Year 2002-3 budget. Thus, the additional \$1m proposed should be increased to at least an additional \$30 million.

For the future good health of the state of New Jersey, it is critical that we do not throw away the expertise and momentum that has been built up over the past three years. Inadequate funding for the program now would directly result in thousands more New Jersey youth becoming addicted to tobacco, and thousands more New Jersey adults being killed by tobacco each year.

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The views expressed in this and other articles in the Challenger are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the views of UMDNJ or of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.

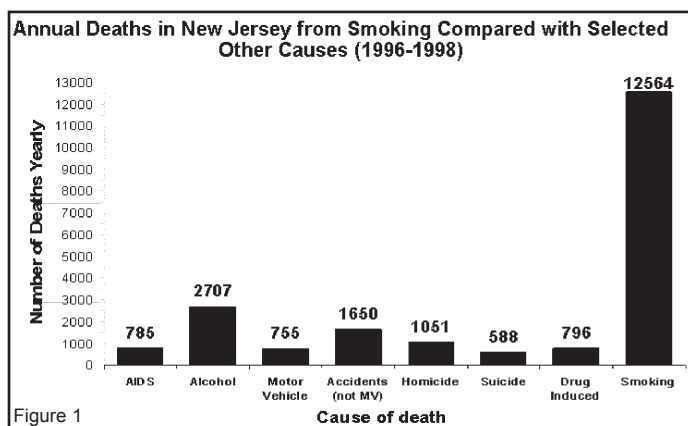


Figure 1