

## **Tobacco is not lifestyle choice, but a powerful drug**

I am responding to the February 17th editorial titled, "Use the carrot, not the stick" and to the response from John Roberts, CEO of CMC-Union on February 21st. I very much agree with Mr. Roberts that, when it comes to tobacco use, the "carrot approach" alone is not enough. Policies that strongly deter tobacco use in the work-place and in public are long overdue.

- There are two key points to make. The first, which Mr. Roberts articulated, is the issue of who pays for this "freedom to use tobacco." The answer is that we all do - in exorbitant and steadily rising health care costs. Tobacco use is the single most avoidable cause of disease, disability and death in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control, resulting in more than \$75 billion in direct medical costs each year.
- The second point is that com-paring tobacco use to other "lifestyle choices" such as diet and exercise is comparing apples to oranges. Tobacco is a highly addictive drug. Research shows that addiction can occur within weeks of experimental use. This explains why 90 percent of adult tobacco users started their "lifestyle choice" before the age of 20. Naturally prone to experimentation, teens may try tobacco to feel grown up or as an act of rebellion. Unfortunately, once the brain is bathed in nicotine, addictive pathways form. This physical phenomenon does not happen when one eats a little too much junk food or makes the choice to go skydiving.
- There is no doubt that a variety of lifestyle choices impact health and well-being. Obesity is another serious health issue that falls in this category. Workplace and community health campaigns that reward positive lifestyle behavior and do not just punish destructive behavior can empower people to embrace change that improves health. However, because of its insidious nature, addictive powers and its association with a continually growing list of death and ill-ness, tobacco is in a category of its own. Stronger worksite deterrents may be the "stick" that makes the difference.
- It is time for North Carolina to wake up and actively acknowledge the destruction caused by tobacco. In doing so, bolder policies and practices can be enacted. These steps will provide protection against toxic secondhand smoke, as well as the push that some need to get help and conquer tobacco addiction.

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