

November 9, 2008

Get serious on smoking

TennCare needs program of medication, therapy

By Dr. David Charles

Tennessee Voices

If you need further evidence about the power of nicotine, consider this: Why would a person smoke a cigarette before coming to the doctor's office for a checkup?

The answer is simple, which hopefully readers know, as well: Nicotine is highly addictive.

Wouldn't you think the patient knows the "quit-smoking" lecture is coming? (I can only wish they would listen to the lecture.) Still, people continue to smoke — taking years off their lives and driving up the cost of health care.

I am a neurologist and can tell you that smoking increases the risk of having a stroke. According to the American Cancer Society, smoking also causes about 90 percent of the lung cancer deaths in men and almost 80 percent of the lung cancer deaths in women. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that heart disease is the nation's No. 1 killer and that cigarette smokers are two to four times more likely to develop coronary heart disease than nonsmokers. The issue of second-hand smoke, especially for children, is another topic altogether.

We are in a health crisis with nearly one-fourth of all Tennesseans smoking, and the percentage soars to 35 percent of those residents enrolled in TennCare, says the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. It is an economic crisis for Tennessee, too — especially since TennCare picks up the tab on the procedures, medicines, surgeries and therapies associated with the various diseases attributed to patients who are long-term smokers.

Today, the annual health-care costs related to smoking in TennCare alone is about \$626 million, estimates the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. Expect costs to grow unless TennCare takes action. I would advocate for the program to begin paying for smoking-cessation medication and therapy for those who want to quit.

Quitting is hard; the American Cancer Society points out that it sometimes takes individuals many attempts to end the nicotine addiction. It works best when a patient combines medication and support or group therapy to stop smoking.

As a neurologist in Middle Tennessee and one who sees TennCare patients, I know we have to battle the terrible health effects of long-term tobacco addiction.

Each day, I see my job as an opportunity to practice preventive medicine — to look for ways to prevent strokes, heart disease and lung cancer. It's time that TennCare did the same. An investment in smoking-cessation efforts now should save lives in the future and reduce TennCare spending on

smoking-related illnesses.

Ben Franklin is still right: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!"

Dr. David Charles is an associate professor of neurology at Vanderbilt University and chairman of the Alliance for Patient Access.