

March 19, 1996

The Honorable Neil Abercombie
U.S. House of Representatives
1233 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Abercombie:

On behalf of the American Society of Internal Medicine (ASIM), I am writing to urge you to support the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) proposal to restrict the promotion and sale of cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products to children and adolescents. Considering that most people begin to use tobacco products in their teenage years, a campaign targeted toward ending the promotion and sale of tobacco to teenagers is an effective approach to reduce the leading preventable cause of disability and premature death in our country.

Alarming, tobacco use among teens and adolescents continues to rise. In 1994, nearly 19% of eighth-graders had said they had smoked in the past month, a 30% increase from 1991. The resulting health consequences are equally as grim, as almost 1,000 of the 3,000 teenagers who begin smoking each day will die of tobacco-related disease. Smokeless tobacco usage has also increased dramatically.

The FDA-led effort to curtail teen access to tobacco products comes at a time when the need is great. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report entitled, "State Tobacco Control Highlights -- 1996" found that, despite laws in every state that prohibit the sale of tobacco products to minors, underage buyers were able to successfully purchase tobacco products from retail outlets nearly 75% of the time and from vending machines more than 95% of the time. Clearly, the problem of inadequate enforcement of tobacco regulations must be addressed.

Also, it is time that our nation is afforded protection against advertising practices that target our children. The three most popular brands of cigarettes among teen smokers are the three most heavily advertised brands, accounting for 86% of sales to youths compared to 35% of sales to adults. Requiring anti-smoking advertising spots and placing limits on the promotional activities employed by tobacco product manufacturers is necessary to counteract the glamorization of teen smoking.

Furthermore, the FDA proposal has enjoyed widespread support. The adult community has indicated that the proposal is appropriate as 61% believe that the tobacco industry encourages teens to smoke. The proposal also has been endorsed by numerous health, medical, children's, and religious groups, as well as by 28 state attorney generals.

Again, ASIM requests that you support the FDA proposal on tobacco promotion and distribution to children and adolescents and that you oppose any efforts to weaken, delay, or preempt this important initiative.

Sincerely,

Alan Nelson, MD
Executive Vice President