

March 4, 1996

Honorable Donna E. Shalala, Ph .D.  
Secretary  
United States Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Madam Secretary:

On behalf of the American Society of Internal Medicine (ASIM), I am writing to express support for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's January 19, 1996 final rule on tobacco regulations for substance abuse prevention and treatment block grants. ASIM is pleased that a state's receipt of a substance abuse prevention and treatment block grant will be contingent on its meeting the requirement of implementing and enforcing a statute prohibiting the sale or distribution of tobacco products to individuals under the age of 18. Also, while we understand the concern that a reduction in block grant allotment for non-compliance could weaken state alcohol and other drug prevention programs, we concur that the incentive to meet the performance objectives spelled out in this rule must be strong.

Providing states with financial incentive to enforce the age requirement for the purchase and use of 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.

Although ASIM is pleased that this rule will place an increased emphasis on enforcing the barriers necessary to prevent tobacco usage among our youth, we believe that additional steps must be taken. We reiterate that there is a need for broader, more comprehensive action to help rectify the problem of teen tobacco use.

ASIM supports the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) proposed rule, published on August 10, 1995, outlining "Regulations Restricting the Sale and Distribution of Cigarettes and Smokeless Tobacco Products to Protect Children and Adolescents." In order to make significant inroads against teen tobacco use, it is important that the FDA complement the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's final rule by imposing more stringent restrictions on the sale and distribution of tobacco products.

Thank you for your full consideration of these comments. ASIM will continue to assist in achieving the goal of reducing the use of tobacco products by our nation's youth.

Sincerely,

Alan Nelson, MD  
Executive Vice President