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Marin Voice: City councils need to ban tobacco from local pharmacies

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The Marin County Pharmacists Association and the Smoke-Free Marin Coalition are in the midst of a campaign to keep tobacco out of pharmacies. Seventy-five percent of Marin pharmacists have stopped selling tobacco products because it sends a mixed message.

Pharmacists are perceived by many as among the most trusted of health care professionals. By selling tobacco products, pharmacies convey approval of tobacco use and send a message that it is not so dangerous to smoke, confusing youth.

Seeing tobacco products in pharmacies frustrates smokers' efforts to quit by stimulating physical cravings and emotional ties to smoking.

The sale of both tobacco products and the medicines used to treat tobacco-related illnesses presents a troubling conflict of interest.

San Rafael residents representing the Smoke-Free Coalition, American Cancer Society and local pharmacists have approached the San Rafael council about adopting a tobacco-free pharmacy and are waiting for a public hearing.

Twenty-five percent of pharmacies that still sell tobacco in Marin are working in chain-store pharmacies. However, most pharmacy chains permit their local pharmacies to go tobacco-free only when there is a local ordinance, similar to

those enacted for Marin's unincorporated areas, San Francisco, Richmond, Santa Clara County, Sonoma County and many other jurisdictions across the country.

Pharmacists tend to embrace these policies afterwards.

CVS/pharmacy stopped selling cigarettes and all tobacco products in its 7,600 stores nationwide on Oct. 1, 2014 and other pharmacies should follow.

The CVS Health Research Institute study results one year later showed a measurable reduction in tobacco sales as well as an increase in nicotine patch purchases, indicating that there was also a positive effect on attempts to quit smoking.

In a Sept. 15 press release, Dr. Troyen A. Brennan, chief medical officer for CVS Health, stated: "One year ago, we stopped selling tobacco products because it conflicted with our purpose of helping people on their path to better health. We know that more than two-thirds of smokers want to quit. We also know that cigarette purchases are often spontaneous. And so we reasoned that removing a convenient location to buy cigarettes could decrease overall tobacco use. This new data demonstrates that CVS Health's decision to stop selling tobacco did indeed have a real public health impact."

Thomas E. Menighan, American Pharmacists Association's executive vice president and CEO, applauded the CVS decision, saying: "Pharmacists are health care providers and we must commit to limiting access to products that are known to cause disease and poor health. This action adds CVS Caremark to a long list of pharmacies that have already stopped the sale of these dangerous products."

In 2008, San Francisco broadened an ordinance that leveled the playing field for all pharmacies and included big-box stores and grocery stores because the same philosophy applies that health care and tobacco contradict each other.

In San Rafael, Bill Daniels, owner of United Markets, stopped selling tobacco products 13 years ago and refuses to sell electronic smoking devices. He said that dropping tobacco products was profitable in the long run for his stores: "When store owners eliminate tobacco products from shelves, profits come back threefold. Healthy stores promote healthy communities."

The Smoke-Free Marin Coalition and the Marin County Pharmacists Association proclaim that it is time for all city councils to adopt tobacco-free pharmacy ordinances to help our local pharmacies free themselves and their customers from Big Tobacco.

Jennie Cook of Larkspur is the chair of the Smoke-Free Marin Coalition. Aglaia Panos is president of the Marin County Pharmacists Association.