

WE CANNOT AFFORD TOBACCO

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Approximately 20 percent of adult Americans smoke tobacco. All Americans, however, smokers and nonsmokers alike, pay the price for smoking. Despite prolonged efforts to reduce smoking in the United States, it is still the leading *preventable* cause of death, responsible for 443,000 deaths—nearly one in five—every year. Millions of others suffer chronic diseases caused by smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke. Thousands of babies are born prematurely every year to mothers who smoke. Each year, direct health care costs from tobacco use are approximately \$96 billion. Almost one-third of those costs are borne by taxpayers through programs such as Medicare and Medicaid.

Despite these staggering costs and health effects, and despite the fact that nicotine addiction is hard to overcome without help, the budgets for proven smoking-cessation programs have been cut in recent years. At the same time, the astoundingly profitable tobacco industry continues to devote massive resources to maintaining its profits by promoting tobacco use. While health care in America is in the media every day, the number one preventable cause of rising health care costs is well down on the health care agenda. The facts show we simply cannot afford tobacco any more.

As the number one respiratory hospital in the United States, National Jewish Health is committed to researching and treating the effects of tobacco, and to providing tobacco-cessation programs. Our

genetic research focuses on discovering how and why tobacco affects people. Our Quitline has helped more than 700,000 smokers across the country quit smoking. Bloomberg Philanthropies and its global partners have provided substantial support for worldwide efforts to reduce smoking. But these efforts and many others are not nearly enough.

Innovative and bolder steps toward the eradication of tobacco use are needed by governmental agencies. Farmers should be subsidized to grow crops other than tobacco. Education needs to go beyond the gruesome stories of former smokers featured in the current CDC advertising campaign to broader programs aimed at preventing children

from ever lighting that first cigarette. Tobacco-cessation programs require sustained investment even in a challenging economic environment. Partnerships between government and the private sector should reach all demographics through increased support for state quit lines, higher excise taxes on tobacco products and laws barring smoking in all public facilities.

Can America develop a culture in which smoking is not acceptable? We are moving in that direction, but with high hurdles and formidable opponents. Achieving this goal is not easy, but we cannot afford the alternative.

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One in a series of commentaries by leading physicians and researchers at National Jewish Health.