

**ALAN BLUM AND
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GUEST OPINION

Why CVS kicked the habit

There are more than 56,000 pharmacies in the United States, two-thirds of which are now owned by discount stores like Walmart, supermarkets like Publix and drugstore chains such as Walgreens, CVS and Rite Aid. In stark contrast to locally owned, independent community pharmacies which stopped selling cigarettes decades ago (or never sold them in the first place), virtually all of the chain drugstores still display cigarettes at the checkout counter.

Until October that is, when the second-largest drugstore chain, CVS, will have pulled them from the shelves. When CVS announced on Wednesday that it was dropping cigarette sales, even those of us who have worked for many years for this very goal were caught off guard. The drugstore chains had all been adamant in their refusal to make such a move and forego this revenue. Cigarettes represent a relatively small percentage of the chains' profit, but their availability lures customers who then buy other items. And let's face it, customers who smoke cigarettes are far more likely to need the medications and other remedies that drugstores sell.

So why did one drugstore chain break ranks and kick the habit now?

As CVS expands into walk-in Minute Clinics, staffed by physicians and nurses, and as it expands its home health services division, company executives realized that they couldn't get away much longer with CVS' claim to be a partner in the health care team while selling and displaying the leading preventable cause of death, disease, hospitalizations and high medical costs. If the company expects to be taken seriously in its decision to be a full-service health care company, it can no longer have its cake and eat it, too.

The chorus of praise of CVS from health organizations was astonishing. The Washington-based lobbying group, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids even called the move "courageous." What nonsense. When Target made the same decision more than 15 years ago in the interest of the health of their consumers, few noticed.

Selling cigarettes and other tobacco products in 7600 CVS drugstores in America has associated these deadly products with the healthful image of the pharmacy. As early as 1971, the American Pharmacists Association adopted the position that pharmacies should not sell tobacco products because they are antithetical to their

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CVS, the nation's second-largest drugstore chain, says it will phase out cigarettes, cigars and chewing tobacco by Oct. 1. (AP)

CVS

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role as health-care providers. Why, then, should it have taken fifty years after the Surgeon General's landmark report indicting cigarettes as the leading cause of lung cancer to stop selling them? Almost all independent pharmacies long ago ended their cigarette sales, recognizing the conflict of interest. Indeed, due to rapid growth of the chain drugstores and their acquisition of independent pharmacies, a greater percentage of pharmacies sell cigarettes today than twenty-five years ago.

The motivation behind the announcement involved a calculus ultimately focused on shareholder value, despite being couched in public health terms. The expansion of health-care services beyond dispensing medications and immunizations means that there would have been an even starker disconnect between health at the back of the store and disease at the front. CVS shareholders will potentially gain a windfall if this expansion beyond pharmacy into the practice of medicine is successful.

The decision was no doubt also spurred in some measure by mounting pres-

sure, albeit slow, over several decades from physicians, pharmacists, tobacco control advocates, and faith-based groups. Years of work in California by Prescription for Change and other organizations ultimately resulted in 2008 in a ban on tobacco sales in pharmacies in San Francisco. Boston enacted its ban the same year, and many cities and towns in Massachusetts have successfully followed suit.

When there is enough public awareness, a travesty such as pharmacies selling cigarettes comes to an end. Walgreens and Rite Aid should immediately emulate CVS' action and cease tobacco sales. Alternatively, any pharmacy that still chooses to sell cigarettes should not be licensed to dispense medications.

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CVS is dropping its tobacco sales business. (MCT)