

COMMENTARY

CVS is now a health care leader? Not so fast

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of the landmark Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health by Alabamian Dr. Luther Terry, which confirmed cigarettes cause lung cancer and contribute to heart disease. Knowing that I've spent more than four decades tackling the smoking pandemic, several students and colleagues have been calling or sending emails since last Wednesday to share the news that CVS has stopped selling cigarettes in its 7,600 pharmacies. "Yay!!!" one person wrote.

But they are surprised when I reply that CVS is not the first national retail chain to end cigarette sales in its pharmacies. Target did so in the late-1990s, and Wegmans in the 2000s. And they are dismayed to learn that CVS rebuffed repeated appeals over the past 20 years by health care organizations and faith-based groups to stop selling tobacco products.

Yet now CVS has proclaimed



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that the time is ripe for other drug store chains to follow its "lead" in dropping cigarettes. In fact, as early as 1971, the American Pharmacists Association adopted the position that pharmacies should not sell tobacco products because they are antithetical to their role as health care providers. The vast majority of locally owned pharmacies in the U.S. heeded this recommendation decades ago. For instance, the late Jim Myers of Tuscaloosa stopped selling tobacco products within a few months of opening his first pharmacy in 1975. (In 2012, Jim Myers Drugs' five pharmacies were sold to Walgreens, which still offers cigarettes in its 8,000 drugstores.)

Selling cigarettes in CVS drugstores has associated

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these addictive and deadly products with the healthful image of the pharmacy. Why, then, should it have taken CVS 50 years after the Surgeon General's Report to stop selling them? In part, the answer is that although only a small percentage of the drugstore chain's profits is generated by cigarettes, they lure customers who then buy other items. And let's face it, those who smoke cigarettes are far more likely to need the medications and other remedies that drugstores sell.

Even as CVS begins preaching like a reformed smoker and going by a new name, CVS Health, more than half of the nation's 67,000 pharmacies will still sell cigarettes. That's because the aggressive acquisition by the giant retail chains (including Walgreens, Rite-Aid, CVS and Walmart) of thousands of locally owned community pharmacies has resulted in

a far greater number of drugstores selling tobacco products today than 25 years ago.

For CVS to be praised by the American Public Health Association, the American Medical Association, and other groups that were not even involved in the decades-long effort to end such sales suggests that whatever harmful practices one has done will not only be forgiven but forgotten.

But CVS did not disclose another key reason for its sudden change of heart about selling cigarettes, namely that the company's rapidly expanding walk-in Minute Clinics, staffed by physicians and nurses, must be licensed health care facilities, approved by state health departments. Some states have laws barring cigarette sales in health care facilities, and even those that do not have such a law would still be unlikely to permit a practice that is contrary to their stated public health objectives. Clearly, CVS could no longer have its cake and eat it too.

Meanwhile, the United States is one of only a handful of countries in the world in which pharmacies still sell cigarettes, and health insurers, pharmaceutical companies and the federal government have been conspicuous by their silence on this shameful practice.

A few years ago I received a patient education packet from CVS on managing coronary heart disease. I filed this material next to my photographs of the electronic billboard at the CVS at 15th Street and McFarland (destroyed in the 2011 tornado) with the alternating flashing messages: "We Accept ALL Medicare Rx Plans" and "Marlboro Carton \$30.49." Talk about getting 'em coming and going!

Even more bizarre was the addition of CVS Health to the list of sponsors of the recent "Stand Up To Cancer" telethon to raise money for cancer research. Here's how host Katie Couric put it:

"And by the way, another

new donor in the Stand Up To Cancer movement is CVS Health. This year they made the extraordinary decision to stop selling tobacco, one of the leading causes of cancer deaths worldwide. CVS, I'm buying my toothpaste from you! Now they're taking it a step further. Starting in November they're raising funds for critical cancer research. Thank you, CVS pharmacies, for joining the fight."

Not so fast. I don't think we should be congratulating CVS for finally stopping a practice that it should never have engaged in. To really clear the air, I believe CVS should apologize for having sold the leading cause of cancer for so long.

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