

October 25, 2013 2:42PM

Getting schooled on tobacco

AS I SEE IT

By Howard K. Koh

For too long, a social norm glamorizing tobacco use has led to devastating outcomes. This theme has particular relevance for young adults. Approximately 22.6 percent of Massachusetts' young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 smoke, compared to the commonwealth's overall adult smoking rate of 18 percent.

And, as the 2012 Surgeon General's report "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults" demonstrates, many lifestyle choices that lead to future health risk, including tobacco use, peak from 21 to 25 years of age.

Moreover, the number of smokers who initiated smoking after age 18 has increased from 600,000 (2002) to 1 million (2010). In fact, 99 percent of all smokers start before age 26.

Deglamorizing and denormalizing tobacco use for kids and young adults can help our country reclaim a social norm of health and wellness. Our physical environment affects the daily choices we make, which in turn affect our health.

College and university campuses have a tremendous opportunity to prevent tobacco use and nicotine addiction among students by implementing tobacco-free campus policies and promoting healthy lifestyle choices.

Last September the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), together with several key partners, launched the Tobacco-Free College Campus Initiative (TFCCI) to encourage the voluntary adoption of tobacco-free policies at institutions of higher learning across the nation. These policies support the many people on campus who are trying to quit and dissuade young adults from starting.

It has been a remarkable year since the launch. I am proud to say that colleges and universities around the country are increasingly adopting new tobacco- and smoke-free policies that publicly reflect their commitment to student health.

When we began in September 2012, 774 colleges and universities were tobacco- or smoke-free. Today, more than 1,178 university and college campuses have gone tobacco- or smoke-free, as documented by the Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation.

We celebrate the dramatic rise in that number, while noting it still represents a minority of the 4,583 colleges and universities in the United States.

That's why I am pleased to participate today in the Tobacco-Free Mass symposium at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

The symposium will bring together 200 health, academic and student leaders from Massachusetts' 115 colleges and universities to discuss how they, with their more than 400,000 students, can be trailblazers in promoting tobacco-free campuses. Our hope is that by bringing the leadership of local schools together, we can collectively build upon the progress that has already been achieved.

Several Massachusetts schools, large and small, public and private, have implemented 100 percent tobacco-free policies, and the number is growing.

Schools that implement tobacco-free campus policies should be recognized for leading by example. They are taking voluntary action to promote health, just as HHS did on July 1, 2011, when it instituted a 100 percent tobacco-free policy to protect its 80,000 employees and millions of visitors across the

country.

All institutions of higher learning can follow the lead of HHS and the colleges and universities around the country that have implemented these critical public health changes.

Those who stop smoking and using other tobacco products can immediately and substantially reduce their risk for disease and early death. Everyone who is interested in quitting should seek help from a tobacco cessation program, such as the Massachusetts Tobacco Quit Line, or through their health insurance plans. As a result of the Affordable Care Act, most private health insurance plans will now cover the cost of cessation interventions for tobacco users.

HHS' website, www.BeTobaccoFree.gov, represents another valuable resource that includes user-friendly information on the health impact of tobacco use, federal and state laws and policies, and the best guidance on how to quit. And January 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the first Surgeon General's Report on smoking and health.

The 2014 report will highlight 50 years of progress in tobacco control and prevention, and present new data on the health consequences of tobacco use.

Lastly, I recommend the TFCCI's highly informative website, TobaccoFreeCampus.org.

Massachusetts' institutions of higher learning are uniquely positioned to be public health leaders. With the help of the Tobacco-Free College Campus Initiative, we can reclaim a social norm of health and wellness that can benefit the next generation and beyond.

Dr. Howard K. Koh is Assistant Secretary for Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and former Commissioner of Public Health for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1997-2003.