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HEADLINE: Smoking Restrictions In Federal Buildings Aren't Fair to Workers

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BODY

So far, 1993 has been an unfriendly year for those Americans who, despite lectures and taxes and public disdain, still choose to use tobacco products.

Over the past few months, a total of 42 states and 244 localities have considered legislation to ban or restrict smoking in public places. Congress itself has begun considering a proposal to ban smoking entirely in all federal facilities.

Based on any objective review, onerous restrictions simply are not necessary to manage smoking in the workplace and other public places. It is both technologically feasible and fair to continue accommodating smokers in the workplace while respecting the preferences of others who do not smoke.

One of the primary motivations behind current proposals to ban smoking is the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recently released risk assessment of environmental tobacco smoke, or ETS, in which the EPA designates ETS as a Group A carcinogen. This report has received considerable attention in the media and is widely hailed by anti-smoking groups as a justification for Draconian measures to reduce nonsmoker exposure to ETS.

Critics of the report have raised a number of doubts about the scientific quality of the review, noting particularly that the agency was forced to relax its own standards for statistical evaluation of data in order to demonstrate a statistically significant increase in risk based on exposure to ETS.

More importantly, scientists have noticed that the ETS risk assessment is a review of studies of nonsmokers married to smokers, and therefore presumably exposed to ETS at home. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which is charged with the regulation of workplace hazards, currently is examining the issue of workplace exposure to ETS.

Based on the available data, however, there is simply no reason to believe that exposure to ETS at the low levels encountered in typical workplaces presents an increased risk to worker health. Indeed, all of us are exposed to other substances that the EPA has declared to be carcinogenic every day, but at levels that are not considered to pose a risk to health.

The question of health risks aside, it stands to reason that tobacco smoke

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can, under some circumstances, accumulate in indoor air and cause annoyance or irritation among some people. The question is whether tobacco smoke itself is the problem, or if the same conditions that allow tobacco smoke to accumulate allow other, less visible pollutants to accumulate as well, necessitating a more comprehensive approach to indoor air pollution problems.

Ventilation experts who testified on the federal smoking ban proposal have noted that in many buildings, public and private, fresh-air intake has been sharply reduced over the past two decades in an effort to reduce the energy costs of heating and cooling indoor air. When fresh-air intake or ventilation rates are insufficient to dilute indoor pollutants, these pollutants, including tobacco smoke, can accumulate to levels that affect occupant comfort, resulting in the problem commonly known as "sick building syndrome." In fact, one of the most famous examples of "sick building syndrome" is the EPA's own headquarters here in Washington, where there is no smoking but severe indoor-air quality problems that many believe result from inadequate ventilation.

In short, according to the experts, the accumulation of smoke in workplaces where there is moderate smoking might be viewed as the canary in the coal mine, suggesting the need for general improvements to the indoor air. Studies show, moreover, that the costs of these general improvements are more than offset by increased productivity and reduced absenteeism among employees due to upper respiratory illness.

A third question often raised in considering smoking ban proposals is whether bans are truly necessary to reduce or eliminate nonsmoker exposure to ETS. In fact, there are a variety of measures that can be taken to accommodate the preference of nonsmokers short of a total ban.

Ventilation experts have demonstrated a number of ways that smoking areas can be set aside to minimize nonsmoker exposures, including simply providing local exhaust systems for smoking areas and keeping these areas under negative pressure. Additional enhancements, such as use of air cleaners and high efficiency filters in smoking areas, also can be provided. A third option is dedicated smoking lounges with local exhausts, which can be constructed in a variety of designs, all of which completely eliminate any nonsmoker exposure to ETS.

There simply is no reason for any government - federal, state, or local - or any private employer to abandon efforts to protect the needs and concerns of all employees. It is perfectly possible and eminently fair to continue allowing smokers to work in peace and productivity while protecting equally the interests of nonsmokers.

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