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Campaign won't discourage young smokers

WORCESTER, Mass. -- Children continue purchasing tobacco products easily despite a campaign by the Tobacco Institute persuading retailers to obey state laws which prohibit sales to minors, according to an article in the September 1992 American Journal of Public Health.

In December 1990, officials at the Tobacco Institute, a tobacco industry group, announced they would work with retailers to help curb minors' ability to illegally purchase tobacco. Many states prohibit tobacco sales to those younger than 18 years. The Tobacco Institute also supports bills in several states that would restrict tobacco sales to children.

The study's authors used a group of underage buyers to enter stores and request cigarettes for purchase. When the store clerk placed the cigarettes on the counter and requested payment, the buyer indicated that he or she did not have enough money. The group of underage buyers told the truth about their age when requested and did nothing to conceal their correct age.

Statistics from the study showed that of 156 tobacco retailers visited for the survey, only seven (or 4.5 percent) participated in the Tobacco Institute campaign. Six of the seven retailers were willing to sell cigarettes to children. Eighty-eight percent of the retailers not participating in the campaign were also willing to sell to children.

The researchers say that since the tobacco industry's attempt at self-regulation has been completely ineffective at reducing children's access to tobacco, the active enforcement of tobacco access laws by health officials is a necessity.

Pediatricians ignore suicidal behavior

PHILADELPHIA -- Physicians caring for adolescents often fail to recognize or record histories of previous suicidal behavior and as a result, potentially suicidal teens aren't receiving the care they need, according to a recent study.

This report was published in the June issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health. According to researchers, the single most important risk factor for adolescent suicide is a previous attempt. Researchers surveyed 323 patients aged 12 through 19 years attending a medical clinic for seemingly unrelated medical problems; 48 (14.5 percent) of which reported a previous suicide attempt. The physician's note documented that only eight of the 48 were asked about suicidal behavior. Study results indicated that previous suicide attempts are common among adolescents who seek general medical care at an urban, university-based clinic and that youth who made previous attempts report ongoing psychosocial distress.

Researchers concluded that health providers must reconsider their strategies for recognizing suicidal behavior.

Physicians may consider variables such as: health complaints, previous mental health care, depression and family function in identifying the youth at highest risk.

Infant mortality rates show decrease

BALTIMORE -- Although life expectancy rates didn't increase in 1991, the infant mortality rate continues to descend, reaching an all-time low of 8.9 per 1,000 live births in 1991, according to the July-September Statistical Bulletin. Infant mortality rates have steadily declined, particularly in the past few years. The recent infant mortality rate is the lowest ever recorded in the U.S. In 1990, the estimated new born mortality rate was 9.1, which was still a decline of 7.5 percent from the 1989 rate of 9.8 per 1,000 live births. Last year's declining infant mortality rate contributed to the stabilization of the life expectancy in the same year.

In 1991, there was a halt in the recent gains in U.S. life expectancy, according to preliminary life tables prepared by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and 1991 provisional tables compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics. Longevity at birth, for the resident population, which rose from 74.9 years in 1988 to a record 75.4 years in 1990, remained at that level in 1991.

Among newborn males and females, life expectancy in 1991 remained the same as in 1990, 72 years for boys and 78.8 years for girls.

While figures indicate that life expectancy for whites remain unchanged since 1990, for African Americans, average future lifetime is likely to be a record 70.3 years -- 1.1 years more than in 1989; the gain is expected to be 1.2 years for boys and one year for girls.

Playground injury manual

SYLACAUGA, Ala. -- A new manual is available that contains guidelines and checklists to help identify, provide and maintain better, safer playgrounds for children.

The "Playground Safety Manual" is a 30-page publication with chapters on how to inspect existing equipment for hazards; general safety considerations; specific playground equipment safety considerations; and the school's responsibility.

The manual was developed by S. Donald Palmer, M.D., Tom Jambor, Ed.D. and Richard Colan, M.D., in cooperation with the AAP Alabama Chapter and the University of Alabama-Birmingham.

The manual contains simple questionnaires school officials may use in inspecting their playground equipment. Specific questionnaires on playground pieces are included to help determine whether the equipment poses a hazard to children.

An appendix includes weekly playground safety inspection sheets, selecting and purchasing equipment guidelines and a list of references and selected readings.

For more information about using and purchasing this manual contact the Alabama-Birmingham Injury Control Research Center at (205) 934-7845 or contact Dr. Palmer at (205) 245-3267. The manual costs $4.

Editor's note: Health Briefs summarizing journal and magazine articles, news reports, child health statistics and new resources of interest to pediatricians and parents. To submit a Health Brief, contact: Marianne Meister Fischtein, News Writer, AAP News, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., PO Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927.