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Our View: Secondhand smoke-health link inescapable

A new study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention draws the strongest link ever between smoking bans and overall public health.

The study focused on the city of Pueblo, Colo., and heart attack rates in that city over three years following the 2002 adoption of a workplace smoking prohibition.

Before the ban, the city averaged 257 heart attacks per 100,000 residents. Three years later, the number had dropped to 152 per 100,000 residents.

In control groups -- two other areas near Pueblo that didn't adopt smoke-free laws -- heart attack rates over the same period remained unchanged.

Terry Pechacek, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention scientist who authored the report, said the study suggests that secondhand smoke is a terribly under-recognized cause of deaths in the country.

In central Wisconsin, smoking-ban debates primarily have centered on two countervailing contentions: Advocates by and large want to be able to dine out without confronting cigarette smoke. Opponents generally believe property owners have the authority to set the rules under their own roofs.

Health professionals always have argued that smoking bans protect the well-being of people who work in the environments in which tobacco is used -- bars, restaurants and bowling alleys, to name a few.

This study suggests -- and only suggests, because some factors were not considered in the analysis -- that health benefits may extend well beyond hospitality-industry workers.

(The study assumed declines in the amount of secondhand smoke in Pueblo buildings after the ban, but did not measure that. The researchers also did not sort out which heart attack patients were smokers and which were not, so it's unclear how much of the decline can be attributed solely to reduced secondhand smoke.)

But it is the ninth scientific review that has found a direct link between smoking prohibitions and improved community health. The growing body of evidence that tobacco bans save lives simply cannot be ignored.

That was part of what drove Weston to adopt its ban last month. And it should be the argument that drives other central Wisconsin municipalities and the state to pass bans.

This isn't about property rights. It isn't about eating your fish fry without someone exhaling a cloud of smoke in your face.

It's about saving lives, and our path should be clear.
