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Join the march to fire-safe cigarettes

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Fires that destroy people and homes, life and property and physical and mental health are a stark reminder of the difference between injuries and accidents. Injuries are frequently preventable, while accidents often are not.

The common denominator underlying recent fires in the Triangle, and many others over the last decade (including one that killed two N.C. State University students two years ago and another that took the lives of five UNC-Chapel Hill students) is a cigarette.

Cigarettes are the No. 1 cause of fatal residential fires in the nation. Cigarette fires kill more than 800 people and injure over 25,000 annually. Many of those injured and killed are children or the elderly, including nonsmokers. Cigarette fires cause 5 percent of Burn Foundation registry admissions and almost 50 percent of deaths. Costs of property loss, health care and loss of work exceed $6 billion.

Many people assume that cigarette fires result only from carelessness -- improper disposal of cigarette butts or intoxicated smokers falling asleep. Blaming fires solely on individual behavior misses a crucial point: technology has existed for decades to make cigarettes safer and less likely to cause fires, but the tobacco industry has not implemented it widely.

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Traditional technology keeps a cigarette burning even without puffing. This is accomplished by including a significant amount of citrate-burning agents. Within 10 minutes, 90 percent to 100 percent of traditional cigarettes will cause fires in ignition tests -- and a cigarette can smolder for up to 45 minutes.

Fire-safe cigarettes have less propensity to ignite upholstered furniture, mattresses, curtains, clothes, etc. In tests, only 5 percent to 20 percent of fire-safe cigarettes ignite materials within 10 minutes. These cigarettes are more likely to self-extinguish than to ignite.

Fire-safe cigarettes create less fuel by, among other things, reducing the tobacco density in cigarettes, causing less surface contact by decreasing cigarette circumference and limiting burn additives.

These cigarettes are not new. Patents for self-extinguishing cigarettes were granted 70 years ago. In the 1970s, RJR identified factors affecting ignition propensity. By the 1980s, Phillip Morris and RJR developed, but did not market, reduced-ignitability cigarettes. In 2000, Phillip Morris began marketing Merit, a cigarette less likely to ignite furniture but not advertised as "fire-safe."

Attempts to introduce national legislation for fire-safe cigarettes have not been successful. In 1978, U.S. Rep. Joseph Moakley filed a bill to regulate cigarettes as fire hazards after a fire killed five children and parents. In 1987, a national Technical Study Group reported that fire-safe cigarettes were both technically and economically feasible. In 1994 and 1999, Moakley again unsuccessfully introduced bills to establish safety-testing standards.

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Since 1999, states have begun to take action. In 2000, New York became the first to require that all cigarettes sold within its borders must be fire-safe. Wholesalers and manufacturers not in compliance are subject to fines of $10,000. Retailers can be charged $500 to $1,000 per sale. The civil fines are used for education and fire-prevention.

The New York law received support from the Trauma Foundation, the American Burn Association, the International Association of Firefighters and the National Association of State Fire Marshals, among dozens of organizations. Opposition came primarily from the tobacco industry (and its allies such as convenience store associations) that feared liability and potentially less profit.

Fire-safe legislation has also been approved in California, Vermont, Illinois, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Twenty-two other states have bills pending -- but not North Carolina.

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The tobacco industry claims fire safety can be accomplished by changing individual behavior and producing more fire-resistant furniture and clothing. While additional environmental and behavioral measures are clearly needed, abdicating industry responsibility in the face of existing technology for decades is irresponsible and unacceptable.

Nationally, there is a Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes, with leadership from the National Fire Protection Association, the AARP, the American Burn Association and the American College of Chest Physicians. The coalition calls on manufacturers to produce and market only cigarettes that adhere to fire safety performance standards. Information about the coalition that is working to implement this standard in every state can be found at www.firesafecigarettes.org.

In North Carolina, cigarettes caused over 300 residential fires in 2002 alone, with 130 deaths. The state must start to turn the tide. The first step is education about the problem. The second is to fund and build a statewide coalition. Finally, the political leadership must introduce appropriate fire-safe cigarette legislation that would protect citizens from cigarette-caused fires, most of which are preventable.

The tobacco industry here is already manufacturing fire-safe cigarettes for shipment to other states. The high economic and medical costs, especially loss of life loss of life, demand intervention in North Carolina as well.

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