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English 015

18 March 2015

A Lurking Threat within the Air at Penn State University

Huffing and puffing while walking to class, I never imagined that my greatest obstacle at college would lie within the air. Arguably unavoidable, a toxin diffuses throughout the atmosphere everyday on campus, and the root of this chemical is initiated by the injurious habit of numerous students, faculty members, and locals: smoking. Ever since my youth, second hand smoke has been the bane of my well-being. As a person who suffers from severe asthma, even the slightest exposure to the substance causes respiratory problems during my regular commute on campus. With my inhaler handy, I proceed cautiously throughout the day, trying to avoid the anonymous smoker who may be prone to spontaneously light up a cigarette directly in front of me. Although one person alone could cause great and often unintentional harm, smokers are given the upper hand right to continue smoking in nearly all outdoor public locations, especially on campus (Penn State University). Generally, students and faculty who take part in the act believe that bans and regulations would infringe on their right to smoke outdoors, and ultimately inhibit their own personal decisions on consumption (Lambert). However, the negative externalities that the by-product of their tobacco spawns to the public far outweigh the positive, evidently delineating why smoking should be further regulated in public spaces, and particularly on campus grounds at Penn State University.

The primary reason why one argues for increased smoking regulations and bans is due to the product that is released throughout the process and action of smoking tobaccos. Second hand smoke or environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), is a hazardous substance to human exposure, and is categorized as a “known human carcinogen” (Wand). Likewise, second hand smoke can cause a plethora of health issues if one comes in contact with the carcinogen. According to facts provided by the CDC, “Secondhand smoke contains more than 7,000 chemicals. Hundreds are toxic and about 70 can cause cancer. Since the 1964 Surgeon General’s Report, 2.5 million adults who were nonsmokers died because they breathed secondhand smoke” (CDC). Additionally, the main ways the substance harms people is through the cause of cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, and SIDS, with the most vulnerable to these symptoms being children and those currently suffering from respiratory disorders (CDC). Through modern advancements in research and technology in the 21st century, the argument that second hand smoke is a lethal health danger is nearly indisputable.

Nonetheless, many continue to claim that regulations are futile because exposure to the smoke outdoors is usually in very small quantities, making the adverse effects of the toxin insignificant and slight. Thomas Lambert, an associate professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law and advocate against the regulations states, “When many more individuals smoked and there were much higher ETS concentrations in public places, exposure to an hour's worth of prevailing levels of ETS was equivalent to smoking 0.004 cigarettes. Put differently, one would have to breathe smoke-filled air for 4,000 hours in order to inhale as much tobacco smoke as a smoker inhales in a single cigarette.” (Lambert). The interpretation Lambert describes within his essay is a commonly misunderstood impression people often develop about the effects of exposure to the human body. This common mindset enables one to believe that it’s

acceptable to breathe in second hand smoke because it is most likely a very slight amount in comparison to that of the actual person smoking, and that one would have to consume an enormous quantity of the carcinogen in order to suffer long term consequences. However, this view is a fallacy, and is basically begging the question that second hand smoke cannot possibly be harmful because the concentration in the air is so little. In reality, it is not okay for people to involuntarily inhale any given amount of the substance, because the instant it enters your body, you are at risk of developing the negative conditions associated with ETS (CDC). Furthermore, even small amounts of smoke can also induce asthma attacks and other respiration complications from people who are more susceptible to the smoke (CDC). Whether the percentage of the second hand smoke in the air is high or low, any amount of exposure to ETS is risky to one's health, especially to those with current or previous respiratory conditions.

Although it is proven that the effects of smoking are detrimental to all, the true center of the argument lies within the philosophical question of liberty, one of our unalienable rights. In America, every citizen has the right to do what they want to do, and make their own decisions (Sen). However, what if their choices begin to affect those living amongst them negatively. Should their actions be inhibited to protect the people around them, or should the person have the right to continue committing the deed? In the case of smoking, the individual has the right to consume the tobacco if they personally want to make that lifestyle decision (Sen). Nonetheless, who is granted the authority on liberty if their actions are harming people around them? Non-smokers plead that they have the right to clean air and a non-smoking environment due to the destructive repercussions of the second hand smoke. In her research article about the positive effects of public smoking bans, Kelley Ward creates a fine analogy to why the act should be regulated in relation to rights. She says, "Society recognizes that people have a right not to be

involuntarily exposed to known carcinogenic substances, even if only to small amounts and for brief periods. That's why, for example, extensive and very expensive precautions are taken when asbestos is removed from buildings” (Ward). This analogy inquires why smoking is not held to the same standard as asbestos, although both are considered harmful carcinogens. All people, smokers and non-smokers alike, have the right to an asbestos free environment. Conversely, smokers continue pollute the air with their use of tobacco, which is a very similar carcinogen in terms of health effects to the asbestos. Smokers should not have the right to put others at jeopardy to serious health effects, determining the reason for further regulations in public outside areas.

Moreover, many universities across the country are presently implementing tobacco free policies on campus due to the harmful effects of second hand smoke. A recent article published by USA Today claims that “there were 774 college campuses around the USA that had banned smoking as of July 1, including 562 that had banned tobacco use altogether. That's up from 131 campuses in 2008.” (Danemen). Likewise, Penn State University abides by many standards found across the country pertaining to smoking regulations, but still permits smoking in almost all locations on campus. The policy at Penn State states that “Smoking of any material is prohibited in all University facilities, at all locations, including University-owned vehicles. It also is prohibited in any outside area adjacent to a facility that's configuration and/or other physical circumstances allow smoke either to enter and affect the internal environment or to unduly affect the environment of those entering or exiting the facility” (Penn State University). In layman's terms, the policy prohibits smoking in all indoor locations found on campus, and also outside entrances where smoke can easily enter. Although it is prohibited to smoke outside doorways, the policy is rarely enforced. During my time at the college, I have witnessed many

students smoking outside building entrances almost every day, and the university does nothing to halt their actions. Besides coming in contact with it near external entrances, the policy fully allows students, faculty, and all other individuals to smoke in any additional location on campus. This means one can come in contact with the substance on the walk to class, or any supplementary form of non-motorized vehicular transportation. I believe that on campus smoking regulations will allow students to further avoid contact with the toxin regularly on campus, greatly improving the welfare of all at Penn State University.

Additionally, the most recent survey conducted by Penn State Pulse Division of Student Affairs pertaining to smoking awareness and statistics, pays close attention to data which may call for future regulations. In 2007, a mass survey was conducted at the university by the division of student affairs, to establish data from a sample size of 1,574 students in regards to their smoking habits and attitudes towards the drug. Students were asked numerous questions such as the reasons why they smoke, how much they smoke, and the frequency of their smoking habit. More importantly, of all participants in the survey “Eighty-seven percent (compared to 93% in 2004) agreed that secondhand smoke is harmful to one’s health” (Penn State Pulse). Also, “64.9% support a campus-wide ban on smoking” and “74.3% support a state-wide, comprehensive ban on smoking” (Penn State Pulse). The data clearly demonstrates the desire of students for increased smoking regulation on campus. Although completed approximately eight years ago, the survey displays that more than half of the participants agreed upon a smoking ban on college grounds. The next survey to be conducted may possibly present a further increase in demand for regulation, proving why implements to the policy on smoking should be initiated.

Although outright smoking bans on campus would surely fix the issue of second hand smoke exposure on campus, complete bans may not be the correct solution to the dispute. An

honors theses written by Hayley Dickinson at Western Oregon University states “Tobacco products are highly addictive, so it is important to understand what addiction is, and how it affects the body. Addiction is a complex brain disease involving compulsive behaviors, including the pathological use of nicotine, alcohol, illicit drugs, controlled prescription drugs, or a combination of these.” (Dickinson). Smoking is a hard habit to crack due to the addictive nature of nicotine consumption, and it may be unfair to absolutely just ban the drug (Dickinson). A proper and fair solution to this subject may be increased regulation through specific designated smoking areas. Through this type of policy, smoking would be further banned in all public outdoor spaces on campus, allowing all students and faculty to travel to class without coming in contact of the second hand smoke (Roszkowski, Neubauer, and Zelikovsky). Moreover, smokers will have to go slightly out of their way to a designated smoking zone that is engineered for proper ventilation and diffusion of the smoke outdoors (Roszkowski, Neubauer, and Zelikovsky). Through correct enforcement, designated smoking zones would allow smokers and non-smokers to reach a common ground on the issue of ETS exposure.

Regardless of the various undesirable effects of smoking, many will continue to indulge in the act within society. It is a habit that has existed for thousands of years, and would be nearly impossible to abolish entirely within a short period of time. However, the initiation of regulations on campus and in public areas is a respectable start to deter the use of cigarettes and other smoking tobaccos. Not only will regulations on campus decrease the use of the drugs, but also protect non-smokers who have been victims to exposure of the substance countless times throughout their lives. More stringent regulations of smoking tobaccos at Penn State University are undoubtedly required to further provide a safe and healthy environment for students and faculty members alike.

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