



## **Sue Ann Says: Help Your Workplace Become Tobacco-Free**

Back in my teaching and smoking years, I remember racing to the teacher's lounge so I could grab a cigarette. Now I couldn't even sneak a smoke out the back of a building (not that I'd want to). Times sure have changed, thank heavens. In Wisconsin, five cities have enacted 100 percent smoke-free workplaces. Something is in the air, in Wisconsin and around the country, and people are making sure the air is tobacco-free.

My staff and I, along with nationally known health care specialists, legislators, business owners and the public, learned about the economic impact of tobacco use from a panel of experts at the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation's 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Dialogue. The Dialogue, held in September, also offered tips for what businesses can do to help make their workplace tobacco-free and help interested employees quit tobacco use.

I was stunned to learn that Wisconsin businesses spend \$1.5 billion dollars every year in direct healthcare costs related to employee tobacco use. Wisconsin businesses lose another \$1.4 billion in worker productivity due to illness and premature death caused by tobacco use.

Tobacco users account for a far larger portion of the health care pot because they are more likely to get sick and more likely to suffer from tobacco-related chronic diseases such as cancer, asthma, and respiratory, dental and lung disease.

Tobacco users miss up to 60 percent more work per year, or 2.3 days, than a person who doesn't use tobacco. This absenteeism costs the nation more than \$31 billion per year in lost productivity. They also take more breaks throughout the work day. Three cigarette breaks a day at an average of 13 minutes per break means smokers miss over a half hour of work each day – costing Wisconsin businesses millions of dollars annually.

Workplaces that allow tobacco use have higher insurance premiums for healthcare, fire and property loss, are subject to greater liability for employees who are exposed to second-hand smoke, and pay higher cleaning and maintenance bills.

But tobacco's biggest impact on Wisconsin comes from the number of employees it kills prematurely. "Wisconsin bears a double burden as a result of tobacco use," explained Dr. Michael Fiore, director of the University of Wisconsin Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention. "First, the pain and suffering of individuals dying unnecessarily. Second,

the extraordinary burden on businesses, who are losing some of their most valuable, highly trained employees. Therefore, tobacco use is not only a critically important health issue; it is a critically important economic issue.”

So what can you and I do to make a tobacco-free workplace a reality? Here are some of the panel’s suggestions:

- Create a non-tobacco use culture in your workplace. This can create gentle peer pressure among employees that will push tobacco users to pursue quitting.
- Make sure all employees understand that tobacco users are not the villains. Addiction is a disease that needs special care and understanding.
- Provide financial and educational incentives for tobacco users to quit. Many Wisconsin businesses require that employees who use tobacco pay a higher share of their health insurance premiums. When combined with free tobacco cessation classes, resources and other wellness programs, this can be highly effective in helping to kick the habit.
- Select an insurance plan that covers medicine and counseling for tobacco cessation that is both effective and affordable. Consider plans that provide cessation programs for the employee’s family as well.
- Make sure non-tobacco use policies are implemented in a way that accommodates a variety of needs. And give your employees plenty of notice before the plan goes into action so they have time to make the necessary physical and emotional adjustments.

Even if we don’t use tobacco ourselves, we pay the price, right out of our own pocketbooks. To say nothing of the friends we lose to premature death from tobacco-related illness. You’ve heard it before: if you want to get an idea across, you can use a telephone. You can send an email. Or you can tell a woman. Talk with family and friends about the economic impacts of smoking. Make your voice heard so together we can address one of Wisconsin’s greatest health and economic burdens. Because it all begins with a health woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson  
*Founder & President*  
*Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation*

*The Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women’s health education and outreach programs, funds women’s health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

For more information on tobacco use in Wisconsin, check out the University of Wisconsin Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention (UW-CTRI) Web site at [www.ctri.wisc.org](http://www.ctri.wisc.org). They have a great publication to help you as your workplaces become tobacco-free. The entire WWHF 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Dialogue is available on WWHF's Web site, [www.wwhf.org](http://www.wwhf.org), and Wisconsin Eye, [www.wiseye.org](http://www.wiseye.org) in the September video archives.

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation would like to thank its esteemed panel for making the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Dialogue a remarkable success. Thank you to:

- Michael Fiore, MD, MPH, University of Wisconsin Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention
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