

Smoking debate filters back to the casino floors

The heat may be turned up on proposals to limit smoking in Atlantic City casinos after Surgeon General Richard Carmona's report on secondhand smoke.

The report stated that separate smoking sections do not prevent secondhand smoke and only smoke-free public places can truly protect non-smokers.

„One of the most important things that came from the report is there is no safe level of secondhand smoke,“ said Michele Holcomb, director for media relations for the South Jersey Region of the American Cancer Society. „The ventilation systems that are used just aren't effective.“

One issue that remains hot is the allowance of smoking in Atlantic City casinos. Russell Sciandra, director of the Center for Tobacco Free New York, believes the surgeon general's report will only add fuel to the fire.

„The casinos (and restaurants) always used the ventilation systems they used as a fall-back point as to why the people should be able to smoke,“ he said. „Now they can no longer hide behind that claim.“

Assemblyman Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic City, announced plans last week to introduce legislation in the fall that would limit smoking to 20 percent of casino gaming floors – making the rest of the gaming floors smoke-free within a year of the bill's passage.

There are those who want casinos – which have opposed smoking limits, saying it would place them at a competitive disadvantage – to be completely smoke-free.

„I think the report makes the fact clear that those workers and guests are being exposed to those deadly toxins,“ Sciandra said. „So either you protect all of the workers or create a lower caste of workers who don't get the protection every other worker gets. The employees have no choice.“

More than 126 million nonsmoking Americans continue to be exposed to secondhand smoke in homes, vehicles, workplaces, and public places, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Sciandra believes that this latest report will help prompt other states to add laws.

„The trend is already there,“ Sciandra said. „Before 2002, California was the only state that had smoking laws.‘

Sciandra added that the debate on the effects of secondhand smoke „is over.“

While there is no way to tell the effect of secondhand smoke on one given person, it is possible to see the effects on a large population.

„The population risk in a state where there are laws restricting smoke is much lower than the risk in a state where there is more secondhand smoke exposure,“ said Frank Leone, director of the Center for Tobacco Research and Treatment at Thomas Jefferson University.

Leone added that in California – which enforced smoking restrictions 20 years ago – the rate of heart disease among residents has gone down in the past 15 to 20 years in accordance with the smoking law.

Secondhand smoke, also known as environmental tobacco smoke, is defined by the American Lung Association as a mixture of the smoke given off by cigarettes, pipes or cigars and the smoke exhaled by smokers.

„It is important for people to know that this issue is not just about smell,“ Leone said. „The issue is side-stream smoke that has all the same constituents of mainstream smoke.“

Carmona’s report also claims there is good evidence that comprehensive smoking bans – such as those in New Jersey and New York City, do not economically hurt the hospitality industry.

The one area that smoking bans cannot control is the household, although both Leone and Sciandra believe that making public areas smoke-free may result in more people quitting.

„The less places people have to smoke, the more likely they are to quit,“ said Leone.