

CVS Drugstore Chain in the USA Kicks its Smoking Habit: But Will the Pharmacy's Cigarette Cessation Really Reduce the Number of Smokers Dental Practices Treat?

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On Wednesday, February 5, Consumer Value Store (CVS) became the first chain retailer/pharmacy in the U.S. to announce that it will suspend sales of all tobacco products, effective October 1. While doctors and politicians roundly praised the decision, such a move is unlikely to have significant impact on smoking rates. As dentists and implantologists, our practices remain on the frontline when it comes to battling oral health. In other words, smoking cessation begins with us.

In case you haven't heard, U.S. pharmacy and convenience store chain CVS announced earlier this month that it will stop selling all tobacco products in its stores beginning in October.

Although the decision is likely to snuff out some CVS profits – around \$2 billion per year – (124 billion INRs) the brand's decision is nothing short of landmark and just might motivate other chain pharmacies to help chain smokers (and every other kind) kick the habit for good.

That's at least the way U.S. news outlets portrayed the story. Even President Barack Obama was strongly encouraged.

"As one of the largest retailers and pharmacies in America, CVS Caremark sets a powerful example, and today's decision will help advance my administration's efforts to reduce tobacco-related deaths, cancer, and heart disease, as well as bring down health care costs – ultimately saving lives and protecting untold numbers of families from pain and heartbreak for years to come," Obama said in a

statement Wednesday, according to CNN.

Blowing Smoke?

But all this pro CVS hype got me thinking. How much will CVS's decision truly impact smoking rates and attempts at smoking cessation? We are, after all, talking about a drug whose active ingredient – nicotine – has frequently been compared to cocaine and heroin in terms of its addictive qualities. In 2011 more than 293 billion cigarettes were purchased in the U.S. alone.

CVS may have opted to retire from the tobacco drug dealing business, but there are literally thousands of just-as-easy purchasing alternatives – especially in other countries like India. And if the other big brand U.S. pharmacy/retailers like Walgreens and Rite Aid don't follow CVS's leadership, they can expect to roughly split that \$2 billion in lost CVS revenue.

I don't mean to burst CVS's or the president's bubble (I fully endorse the company's decision and hope more retailers around the world follow suit), but I think it's important to be realistic about the severity of nicotine addiction and its stubborn persistence in global societies. While U.S. smoking rates have dropped from about 42 percent of the population in 1965 to 19 percent today, experts say those rates are leveling off. Nineteen percent of the US population still leaves some 60 million smokers – 5 million of whom die every year from smoking related diseases, according to the CDC, often cutting their lives short by a decade.

India's smoking rates are even higher.

According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) 23 percent of Indian men and 3 percent of Indian women smoke cigarettes and beedis, amounting to about 8.2 cigarettes per day. Despite a 10 percent drop in smoking rates in the last three decades, tobacco is still India's third top cause of health loss, leading to one million deaths per year. And while the percentage of Indian women smokers seems low, that figure still amounts to 12 million people.

More than Treating Bad Breath and Broken Teeth

As dental implantologists, no matter what country we practice in, based in rural or urban locations, we are treated to an up close and personal look at the damage smoking does to the mouths of our patients, along with the heightened risk of osseointegration failure. The list of complications is extensive, including:

- Periodontal disease – A smoker is 2 to 3 times as likely to develop clinically detectable periodontitis. Smokers also experience more severe periodontal disease.
- Bone and Tissue Loss – A study examining the effect of oral-burn syndrome on dental implants indicated that there is a direct link between oral tissue loss and smoking.
- Tooth Loss and Edentulism – Tooth loss and edentulism is more common in smokers than in non-smokers.

While titanium dental implants and porcelain-fused-to-metal, ceramic, gold or stainless steel crowns are significantly more durable than earlier artificial teeth (which included seashells and wood), they still aren't as incredible as the genuine article – real teeth. Smoking is disastrous on dental implants and

helping patients quit before they undergo dental surgery should be a high priority. It's also a major cause of oral cancer.

But ultimately, our jobs should be more than simple prevention. Considering that some 37 percent of Americans visit their dentist at least once a year. For centuries, doctors have been held in high regard across multiple societies. Why? Because we have always been the possessors and purveyors of knowledge – not only within the narrow confines of our particular specialty, but in a global sense. Our patients value our opinions and trust our medical advice, far beyond our oral expertise.

So again, I applaud CVS's bold decision, even if I'm skeptical it will truly reduce U.S. and global smoking rates. The real goal for dentists is to resolve the world's tobacco crisis one patient at a time.

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