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Testimony in favor of LD 1215: An Act to End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, I am a Portland resident, a pediatrician, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

We can all agree that tobacco inhalation is harmful to the users and to anyone exposed to tobacco products, including traditional cigarettes and electronic smoking devices.

As the child of a smoker, I know the destruction that smoking has. My father began smoking menthol cigarettes at eleven years of age. He stopped when he experienced his first bout of laryngeal cancer in 1974. I was three years old at the time.

When I traveled home to visit my parents in late December 1996, my dad informed me that he had a cancer recurrence and that was the reason for his increasingly hoarse voice the past few months. When he told me that his voice box was being removed less than two weeks later, I was glad that the cancer recurrence was diagnosed promptly, surgery was not delayed, and that the prognosis was favorable. This was not the case five years later when his advanced pancreatic cancer had few treatment options.

Both of these cancers were directly related to smoking and, likely, made worse because my dad was addicted to cigarettes before he was a teenager.

The single reason tobacco companies add flavoring to their products is to entice individuals to begin smoking without the unpleasurable taste of the native product. The harshness and bitterness of tobacco is disguised with sweet and minty flavors, which are most appealing to children and adolescents. We know that the majority of adult smokers start before their eighteenth birthdays, at a time when one's brain is prone to poor decision-making, miscalculation of risks, and under-estimation of long-term consequences. None of us should be fooled by the tobacco company claims otherwise. These flavored products are manufactured, advertised, and sold because companies know that the earlier and longer people use their products, the more profitable the companies become. I am here to remind you that early smokers cost the health care system, impact individual health, and disrupt families with illness and untimely deaths.

In retrospect, I am fortunate that my father was cancer-free for 22 years and that I do not recall his first battle with laryngeal cancer. However, my family was victim to the effects of tobacco. My dad had 3 episodes of cancer, and despite stopping tobacco at the age of 34 years, he ultimately died from smoking cigarettes – an addiction that began before his adolescence.

Flavored tobacco products, including menthol, are meant to hook children like my dad and turn them into life-long smokers to benefit tobacco companies by creating addiction and physical dependence. Ending the sale and distribution of flavored tobacco products is sure to curb the initiation and persistence of tobacco use in children. Without question.

Please end the sale of flavored tobacco products in Maine!

Jennifer A. Jewell, MD, MS, FAAP