

May 7, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is Dr. Florence S. Edwards, DDS. I'm a dentist practicing in Auburn and Topsham, and a board member of EqualityMaine and Coded By Young Women of Color.

Before I was a dentist, I was a child who often spent her time reading *Jet* magazine. *Jet* was the pop culture magazine geared toward descendants of American slavery — the majority of Black Americans. In every issue, there were full-page ads of beautiful Black people smoking menthol cigarettes. The tobacco industry's long history of targeting Black Americans with menthol cigarettes is well-documented.

Equally well-documented are the devastating results. Over eighty percent of Black American adults who smoke use menthol cigarettes, and Black Americans die at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. from tobacco-related diseases.

Following this tried-and-true playbook, the tobacco industry has also preyed upon people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer. In California in the 1990s, the industry's campaign to market to gay men and homeless individuals was called "subculture urban marketing," abbreviated as *SCUM*.

LGBTQ people smoke at higher rates than the rest of the population. And we're now seeing the effects play out. A recent CDC report on the unequal impact of COVID-19, confirmed that LGBTQ people were more likely to contract and suffer severe symptoms of COVID-19. That's because we suffer disproportionately from asthma, COPD, strokes, heart disease, and hypertension — conditions often caused by tobacco use.

And knowing that the younger generation overwhelmingly chooses flavors, the industry pushes everything from menthol to cotton candy to crème brûlée-flavored tobacco to addict the next generation. There are now over 15,000 flavored tobacco products on the market. We know that these flavors are not meant for adults.

Before I wrap up, I want to mention that I wrote an op-ed about this topic that appeared in the Sun Journal this week. It was too long to include everything from it in my testimony, but I did attach a copy of it to my testimony and encourage you to read it.

In conclusion, Maine's youth deserve a healthy future free from tobacco and the chronic illnesses associated with its use. I'm asking that you vote Ought to Pass on LD 1550.

Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.

OPINION

Posted Yesterday at 12:00 AM

Dr. Florence Edwards: Tobacco industry uses menthol, mint, candy flavors to lure, hook Black, brown, LGBTQ youth

LD 1550, sponsored by Rep. Michele Meyer of Eliot, will finally end the sale of flavored tobacco products in Maine. It takes a giant step toward eliminating health disparities among Black and brown, indigenous, LGBTQ, and other marginalized communities. Getting flavored tobacco off the store shelves will give all Maine kids a fair shot at a healthy, productive future, free from tobacco addiction.

Before I was a dentist, I was a child who often spent her time reading “Jet” magazine. “Jet” was the pop culture magazine geared toward descendants of American slavery — the majority of Black Americans. In every issue, there were full-page ads of beautiful Black people smoking menthol cigarettes. From taking out advertisements in Black media to sponsoring Black community events to selling cheaper-priced cigarettes in Black

neighborhoods, the tobacco industry's targeting of Black Americans with predatory marketing of menthol cigarettes is well-documented.

Equally well-documented are the devastating results.

Today, more than 8 out of 10 Black American adults who smoke use menthol cigarettes. And [Black Americans die at higher rates](#) than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. from tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and stroke.

Why menthol? Menthol numbs the mouth and throat, masking the harsh taste and making it easier to start using tobacco. Menthol also makes the smoke easier to inhale more deeply and people who use menthol cigarettes show [greater signs of nicotine addiction and are less likely to successfully quit](#).

The tobacco industry's legacy of aggressive marketing to marginalized populations is not limited to the Black community. Tobacco companies have preyed upon people with mental illness, people with low incomes, and in all cases, kids and young adults. Because human brains continue to develop until age 26, young people are extremely susceptible to nicotine addiction.

Following this tried-and-true playbook, the tobacco industry has also preyed upon people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer.

The LGBTQ community's high rate of smoking can't be explained without accounting for the cynical and aggressive marketing by tobacco companies. In California in the 1990s, the industry's strategy was to push cigarettes to

communities that their executives held obvious disdain for, particularly gay men and homeless people. Their campaign was called “subculture urban marketing,” abbreviated by no coincidence as *SCUM*. They sponsored Pride Month events and took out ads in “Out” magazine. They manufactured the narrative that to be young and gay or trans was to also be a smoker.

When the CDC released [new information](#) on the unequal impact of COVID-19, their findings confirmed what I and other members of the LGBTQ community had thought. LGBTQ people were more likely to contract and suffer severe symptoms of COVID-19. We suffer disproportionately from asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, strokes, heart disease, and hypertension — conditions all associated with severe COVID-19. Tobacco industry targeting puts us at greater risk for other dangerous health conditions.

It’s unconscionable.

Knowing that the younger generation overwhelmingly chooses flavors ([four out of five kids](#) who have used tobacco started with a flavored product), the industry pushes everything from menthol to cotton candy to crème brûlée-flavored tobacco to addict the next generation. There are now over 15,000 flavored tobacco products on the market.

Tobacco smoke destroys cells at the microscopic level and damages our DNA. This leads to greater instances of severe complications that, as a dentist, I’m unfortunately very familiar with — infections, gum disease, tooth loss, and oral cancer. The surge in youth tobacco consumption will make

these health problems more common. And that surge is being driven overwhelmingly by menthol, mint, and candy flavored tobacco products that the industry markets to teenagers.

The professional consensus on the harms posed by menthol and other flavored cigarettes is unambiguous. The [American Medical Association](#) and the [American Dental Association](#) recommend ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products because of their well-documented harm to public health.

Our legislators will have their best chance yet to address this during the current legislative session.

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