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Enforcing state's smoking ban

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Contrary to the impression left by the Chicago Tribune's recent front-page article "Smoke ban often defied Downstate; Rural authorities say state's law is too ambiguous" (Page 1, June 30), I want your readers to know there is widespread support and compliance with the Smoke-free Illinois Act, which went into effect Jan. 1 throughout Illinois.

Your article focused only on some small neighborhood taverns, not the overwhelming majority of Illinois businesses dutifully following the law. In situations where the state, the local health department or local law enforcement have been informed of people violating the law, steps have been taken.

In those areas where there appear to be repeat violators and a lack of enforcement, our department is working with local officials, public health officials and others to see that the law is followed.

As with any new law, it will take time, but ultimately it will become the norm and it will become self-enforcing.

There may be some who openly defy the law and they will eventually be dealt with by the legal system. Let's not lose track of why a law that the Tribune has called "one of the most significant landmarks in Illinois public health history" (Editorial, Feb. 27) was enacted. It was passed overwhelmingly by the legislature and signed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich to save lives and protect the public, especially those who work in public places, from the harmful and hazardous effects of secondhand smoke.

While smokers are willing to accept the health risks associated with tobacco use, non-smokers should not have to suffer the consequences of someone else's action. Non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke involuntarily inhale many of the same cancer-causing chemicals that smokers inhale. There is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke, which can cause lung cancer and coronary heart disease in healthy, non-smoking adults and increase the risk of serious respiratory problems in children.

Illinois' restriction on smoking in indoor public places limits non-smokers' exposure to secondhand smoke and is contributing to a shift in public attitude about smoking from acceptable to unacceptable.

—Damon T. Arnold, MD

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