

**GUEST COLUMN: Maureen Busalacchi**

### **Celebrate Mother's Day by Protecting Moms**

Do something nice for your mom and all moms this Mother's Day—help them live longer and healthier lives.

A new study reveals women's life expectancy has taken a downward turn in nearly 1,000 U.S. counties (or roughly 1/3 of the country) - the first negative reversal since the World War I influenza pandemic that killed 675,000 Americans.

The reason, most pronounced in the nation's poorest regions, is that these women are dying younger of diseases related to smoking and being overweight.

Wisconsin women's lifespans don't show a decline in the study. But in a number of Wisconsin counties, women's lifespans don't show an increase either. The reason why? Nearly one-fifth of the adult women in Wisconsin smoke – and it's killing them.

That's almost half a million Wisconsin women who smoke, many of them low-income. This addiction kills about 2,800 women each year, leaving behind about 160 motherless children.

Unfortunately, it gets worse. Of those Wisconsin female smokers, 10,400 are pregnant, which sets the stage for a host of future health and addiction problems for their soon-to-be-born children.

On this Mother's Day, we need to remind ourselves that we can help all mothers – and their children – get healthy and stay healthy. Let's re-commit to the idea of supporting mothers who are quitting smoking.

It is easy to say this is none of our collective business. But the reality is virtually all these women started smoking as children. And because nicotine is as addictive as heroin, a third of them were addicted before they turned 18. They're smoking today because they can't quit on their own. They need our help.

Wisconsin's tobacco prevention programs have reduced smoking rates in this state from more than one-third of all adults to one-fifth of adults. On top of that, Gov. Jim Doyle proposed, and lawmakers passed, a \$1 per pack increase in the cigarette tax last year. More than any other factor, a dramatically higher price will help women quit (especially poor women) and help keep their daughters from picking up a cigarette in the first place.

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation's "First Breath" program, led by former first lady Sue Ann Thompson, has done extraordinary work to help over 1,000 pregnant women quit smoking. And the Wisconsin Tobacco Quit Line offers 2-week starter kits of nicotine replacement therapy and over-the-phone support to help smokers successfully kick their addiction.

These state-supported programs make a real difference in Wisconsin women's lives. But there is still much to do.

Lung cancer death rates among women in this country rose 600 percent in the last half century – almost exclusively due to smoking. Women who smoke also have increased risks of cervical cancer, hip fractures, osteoporosis, and possibly liver and colorectal cancer.

Waitresses in Wisconsin's smoke-filled bars and restaurants are four times more likely to contract cancer than women who work in smoke-free environments, according to the American Cancer Society.

Tobacco companies continue to target young women and girls with flashy advertising in fashion magazines and give-aways like berry-flavored lip balms and cell phone jewelry – they'll stop at nothing to attract the next generation of women smokers.

This Mother's Day will stand as a reminder that we need our lawmakers to stand up to tobacco companies. We need programs to help women quit smoking – and to keep young girls from thinking it's "cool" to light up.

Mother's Day should mean more than an opportunity to thank our moms for all they do for us. Let's do something important for them, too. Preventing smoking-related deaths and illnesses is the least we can do for them. We simply need to enact effective health policies and support the women we love to make it happen.

*Maureen Busalacchi is executive director of Smoke Free Wisconsin.*