

US experts call for rethink of trend to bar smokers from employment

January 22 2009

The increasing trend for employers, particularly in the US, to bar smokers from applying for jobs or staying in post should be stopped, until the appropriateness of such policies has been properly evaluated, argue experts in an essay published in *Tobacco Control*.

As of August 2008, 21 US states, 400 US cities, nine Canadian provinces, six Australian states/territories, and 14 other countries, including the UK, had banned smoking in workplaces, bars, and restaurants.

But in recent years, smoke free workplaces have shifted to "smoker-free workplaces," with some companies even stating "tobacco free candidates only" in their employment policies.

The World Health Organization has barred smokers from employment since 2005, and the National Cancer Institute encourages the preferential hiring of non-smokers.

But it's not just health related organisations who maintain this policy. Weyco Inc, a US employee benefits company, stopped hiring smokers in 2003. It has also made smoking outside work a sackable offence, and recently extended that rule to employees' spouses.

These policies aim to cut cigarette consumption, by promoting the need to quit and by making smoking less socially acceptable, say the authors from the Universities of Washington and Boston.

The evidence backs them up. And there is also some evidence to suggest that these policies could boost productivity and reduce absenteeism, they add.

But quite apart from infringements of personal privacy and individual rights, smokers who are sacked or forced to resign many not be able to find other work, which in itself could have a seriously detrimental impact on their and their families' health, contend the authors.

Smokers will also be unjustly discriminated against in a way that people who risk their health by drinking or eating too much, and exercising too little, are not.

And it may also prompt a shift in thinking about these other behaviours as well, the authors suggest, citing Clarian Health in Indianapolis, which has already pledged to sack employees who smoke, are obese, and whose blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose levels are unhealthily high.

The authors call for a much wider public health debate, and for proper evaluation of these policies, on the grounds that "the potential unintended side effects.. could be far reaching."

The evidence for and against must be carefully weighed up, "to ensure we are addressing the fundamental determinants of tobacco use and reducing related health disparities," they warn.

Source: British Medical Journal

Citation: US experts call for rethink of trend to bar smokers from employment (2009, January 22) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-01-experts-rethink-trend-bar-smokers.html>

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