Dear Friends of the College of Public Health:

Tomorrow, January 11, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most important public health events of the 20th century. On this day, in 1964, Surgeon General Luther Terry released “Smoking and Health. Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service” which confirmed that smoking causes lung cancer.  


Though there had been increasing awareness of the health consequences of smoking, this report was seen as essential in launching a period of steady decline in tobacco use in the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention included the identification of Tobacco as a Health Hazard as one of the ten greatest public health achievements of the 20th century http://www.cdc.gov/about/history/tengpha.htm and that tobacco control remains one of the “Winnable Battles.” http://www.cdc.govwinnablebattles/

At the time of the Surgeon General’s report, about 2 out of 5 American adults smoked (1 out of 2 men; 1 out of 3 women). Today, this number has decreased to about 1 out of every 5 American adults. According to an article published in the JAMA, this reduction in the smoking rate means that 8 million premature deaths have been averted.  

http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1812962 The report goes on to estimate that these 8 million averted deaths resulted in 157 million additional years of life.

While this is a tremendously important accomplishment, the fact remains that over 40 million Americans still smoke, and it is estimated that more than 440,000 Americans die each year of tobacco-related causes. Worldwide, the total number of deaths each year from tobacco is estimated to be 6 million.

The most recent America’s Health Rankings stated that 24.9% of adults in Tennessee report that they smoke-ranking Tennessee 47th in the Nation. Only Arkansas, West Virginia, and Kentucky report higher rates of smoking.

While there is much to celebrate in the 50 years since the Surgeon General’s report came out, there is still much work to do. As the JAMA article concludes “No other behavior comes close to contributing so heavily to the nation’s mortality burden.”

Reducing the health burden of tobacco remains one of the great challenges, but “winnable” for all of us working in public health—helping current users quit and working together to find effective ways to prevent non-users, especially children and adolescents, from starting. With the right information, resources, and opportunity, we know that we can be successful. Today, less than 2% of physicians smoke. Our goal, over the next decade, should be to bring all Americans down to that level.

We are extremely proud that Dr. Mamudu, in the Department of Health Services Management and Policy, is an internationally respected tobacco policy researcher, who, with his team, is working to reduce tobacco use and tobacco-associated disease. You can follow their work at the Tobacco Policy Research Program website:  

http://www.etsu.edu/cph/hsmp/tobaccopolicy/default.aspx

I applaud all of you working to improve our nation’s health, especially, at this important anniversary, those of you working to reduce the impact of tobacco.

Best Wishes,

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