

The shocking cost of smoking: Editorial

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The death toll is jarring: Nearly one-fifth of all fatal fires in New Jersey are caused by a smoker's negligence — and experts say it's most likely more. Nationwide, it's even worse, approaching 1 in 4.

Look at the **destructive, deadly path smoking cut across New Jersey** in the space of one week.

On March 21, four occupants of the Mariner's Cove Motor Inn in Point Pleasant Beach were killed and eight others were injured when a stuffed chair caught fire in the motel's smoking lounge. Two days later, a janitor tossed a still-burning butt into the trash and burned a school to the ground. And last Wednesday, a 77-year-old woman smoked while using oxygen, and died in the fire she ignited.

Smoking is a deadly hazard that screams for a common-sense solution: How do we stop people from burning themselves to death while smoking? Or worse, killing others with their carelessness?

The life-saving burden is on smokers, who must remember that they're literally playing with fire.

What can be done? Decades ago, Big Tobacco pushed for fire-resistant chemicals in clothing and furniture to slow the spread of fires their products sparked. Today, most states — New Jersey included — require the sale of "fire-safe" cigarettes, designed to extinguish themselves if forgotten.

But the fire-retardant chemicals they used cause long-term health damage, possibly putting more lives at risk than they're saving. And neither protects against the fool who sets tobacco ablaze, then touches it to clothes, sheets, curtains, carpet or any of a thousand household products that burn when touched by flame.

New Jersey already requires smoke detectors and fire extinguishers anywhere people sleep. Sprinklers are required in most new schools, hotels and large buildings.

One concrete step New Jersey could still take is mandatory sprinklers in all new homes. The international fire code, on which New Jersey code is based, calls for sprinklers in new one- and two-family houses, though the Christie administration has sided with home builders — sprinklers increase a new home's cost by about 1 percent — and blocked the requirement in New Jersey. Assembly lawmakers are trying again but lack a Senate partner.

In the end, flicking a lit cigarette is like twirling a loaded gun — and there's only so much we can do to legislate against stupidity and neglect. We realize the cost to retrofit old homes and schools with sprinklers is prohibitive, but we should protect our buildings where we can. Requiring sprinklers in new construction would be a life-saving start. The remaining burden is on smokers, who must remember that they're literally playing with fire.

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