New AAP section helps pediatricians address tobacco prevention, cessation

by Sophie J. Balk, M.D., FAAP

The Academy has launched the Provisional Section on Tobacco Control (PSOTCo) to provide pediatricians with the knowledge, skills and resources to reduce children’s exposure to tobacco smoke and help prevent youths from smoking.

The development of the section was inspired by the success of the AAP Julius B. Richmond Center of Excellence, which supports tobacco research, policy and education.

Tobacco use and exposure continue to be enormous public health problems. In 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 19.3% of U.S. adults smoked cigarettes, putting them at higher risk for heart disease, chronic lung disease, cancer and premature death. In addition, more than 430,000 deaths are attributable to smoking each year.

Nearly nine out of 10 smokers start by age 18, and 99% begin by age 26, according to the 2012 surgeon general report Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults.

Beyond tobacco use, an estimated 40 million children and young adults ages 3-19 years are exposed to secondhand smoke, increasing their risk of developing asthma, asthma exacerbations, other respiratory problems and otitis media, according to the 2006 surgeon general report, The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke. It is estimated that secondhand smoke exposure results in more than 400 cases of sudden infant death syndrome in the United States annually.

Parents who smoke are likely to visit a pediatrician more often than their own physician, especially in their child’s early years. Thus, the pediatric visit provides an opportunity to advise parents to quit smoking. Research indicates that pediatrician cessation counseling directed at parents can be an effective technique to limit children’s exposure to tobacco.

However, some pediatricians acknowledge that they do not know how to begin counseling parents or teens. PSOTCo aims to educate pediatricians and other health professionals about all aspects of tobacco prevention and control, including how to counsel teens and parents, offer treatment and/or referral for tobacco dependence, and advocate for public policies to reduce tobacco dependence and exposure.

“The landscape of tobacco prevention and cessation in the pediatric setting has changed dramatically in the last several decades. The new section provides an organized network to ensure prevention and cessation efforts continue to flourish among pediatricians, subspecialists, and other health care professionals and organizations.”

“Some of my most satisfying moments in practice are learning that a parent has quit smoking after receiving my advice and support,” said section co-chair Karen M. Wilson, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP. “As a pediatrician invested in minimizing the tobacco epidemic, I invite AAP members to join the Provisional Section on Tobacco Control today.”

Dr. Balk is a steering committee member of the AAP Provisional Section on Tobacco Control Executive Committee.