

Anti-tobacco activist angry about outdoor bans

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"I've been working in this field for 21 years," sighed Dr. Michael Siegel, one of the pioneers in the anti-secondhand smoke movement in the early 1990s. "The goal was to get rid of smoking on the workplace," he told reporter Suzanne Bohan of the Oakland Tribune.

"I never understood that the goal was to get rid of smoking so that no one even gets a whiff of smoke."

Siegel is now working against many of those he worked with in previous years because of his belief that the anti-smoking movement has gone too far.

"It's a grass-roots social movement that been so successful that it doesn't know where to stop. It's getting to the point where we're trying to protect people from something that's not a public health hazard."

This split in the anti-tobacco movement, though small, recognizes that the successes against smoking have come because of the broad support of the general public. That support is threatened by overbearing regulations that the public won't support, or worse, will ignore.

"We need to ask," wrote Simon Chapman, editor of the anti-smoking journal Tobacco Control, "whether efforts to prevent people from smoking outdoors risk besmirching tobacco control advocates as the embodiment of intolerant, paternalistic busybodies, who, not content at protecting their own health, want to force smokers to not smoke even in circumstances where the effects are immeasurably small."

Simon, the answer is yes. Unfortunately, the zealots will press on, but as California voters demonstrated last November in their defeat of Proposition 86, common sense carries more weight than the quack who speaks from a book of secondhand science. Perhaps the pendulum is beginning to swing back, ever so slowly, to the center.