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New Study Links Secondhand Smoke to Heart Attacks

WASHINGTON, April 5 - A study published in today's British Medical Journal suggests that banning smoking in a community can result in an almost immediate drop-off in the number of heart attacks in that community.

The study, which was originally presented at the 52nd Annual College of Cardiology Scientific Session in 2003, examined the number of people in Helena, Mont., who were admitted to the hospital for a heart attack before, during and after a local ordinance banned smoking in public and workplaces. During the six months that the law was in effect – June through November 2002 – the number of heart attack admissions dropped by 40 percent compared to the same months the years before and after the law. There was no significant drop in admissions for people living outside Helena.

ETS has long been recognized as a long-term health danger, but this is the first study to link banning ETS to an almost immediate decrease in the number of heart attacks in a community. The Helena law, which was in place for six months before being overturned by opponents in December 2002, provided a unique environment in which to study the immediate impact of a smoking ban. The authors of the study were able to look at the public health impact of the smoking ban in Helena before, during and after the law was in place.

M. Cass Wheeler, CEO of the American Heart Association, said that the study should add to existing momentum to enact smoking bans in communities and states across the country. "There has never been better evidence in support of clean indoor air laws," said Wheeler. "The traditional response of asking people who smoke to sit on one side of the room and people who don't smoke to sit on the other is pointless. Banning smoking is the only logical response to the scientific evidence concerning the dangers of secondhand smoke." Each year more than 440,000 Americans die from smoking related illnesses. About 35,000 of these are nonsmokers, who, as a result of environmental tobacco smoke, die from coronary heart disease.

The study, by Richard P. Sargent, MD, Robert Shepard, MD, and Stanton Glantz, PhD, was based on a review of the charts of patients discharged with a primary or secondary diagnosis of acute myocardial infarction (AMI) in Helena, Mont., following implementation of a citywide ordinance banning smoking in public places.

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