

UT System institutions begin working toward a tobacco-free culture at inaugural “Eliminate Tobacco Use Summit”



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HOUSTON — Representatives from each of The University of Texas System’s 14 institutions met last week at the “Eliminate Tobacco Use Summit” to discuss creating a system-wide tobacco-free culture.

Recognizing the significant public health benefits of eliminating tobacco use, David Lakey, M.D., UT System chief medical officer and associate vice chancellor for population health, convened all member institutions to share policies and resources for tobacco cessation, prevention and control.

Summit participants collectively shared tobacco control policies, public education and prevention programs and cessation services currently in place within each institution. By inventorying available resources, UT System academic and health institutions identified areas to take collective action toward measurable reductions in the tobacco burden in Texas.

Each institution developed its own comprehensive plan to improve its tobacco control policies and strategies, which they will bring back to their institutions to facilitate discussion and seek adoption from campus leadership.

“Tobacco remains by far our leading cause of preventable disability and death,” Lakey said. “The four top causes of death in Texas are heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory tract disease and stroke; all are the direct result of tobacco. By reducing tobacco use, we can have a huge positive impact on the lives of our students, employees and communities. Furthermore, we can significantly reduce health care costs.”

According to the Texas Department of State Health Services, tobacco is responsible for 24,500 deaths and \$12.2 billion in excess medical care expenditures annually in the Lone Star State. Tobacco use is linked to a significant risk of heart disease, stroke, lung disease, and more than one third of all cancers, including 90 percent of all lung cancers. Tobacco is also a danger to developing fetuses in smoking mothers, and to non-smokers through secondhand exposure.

“Tobacco remains the single greatest preventable cause of death and disability in the U.S. and Texas,” said Ernest Hawk, M.D., vice president and head of UT MD Anderson Cancer Center’s Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences. “Therefore, it is an extremely important focus for action across the UT System to promote the health and welfare of our students, faculty, staff, patients and communities.”

Attendees included experts not only in tobacco prevention and cessation, but also public health, academic affairs, governmental relations and human resources. In addition, external organizations served as valuable resources, including experts from the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association and the Truth Initiative, among others.

“I am very pleased with the results of the summit,” Lakey said. “Each institution shared openly their challenges and successes, and learned from one another strategies to impact their institutions and communities.”

The summit developed through collaborations between Lakey, Hawk and others within MD Anderson’s EndTobacco program — a science-based initiative built on best practices for tobacco control recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. This program has already implemented several tobacco control policies at MD Anderson, including a tobacco-free hiring policy in 2015.

EndTobacco was launched in 2014 within the cancer prevention and control platform, part of MD Anderson’s Moon Shots Program. The program is an effort to dramatically accelerate the pace of converting scientific discoveries into clinical and population-oriented advances that significantly reduce cancer deaths.

Ideally, the summit will be the first of many such actions — both across the UT System as well as in other university systems within and beyond Texas, Hawk said.

About The University of Texas System

Educating students, providing care for patients, conducting groundbreaking basic, applied and clinical research, and serving the needs of Texans and the nation for more than 130 years, The University of Texas System (/) is one of the largest public university systems in the United States. With 14 institutions and an enrollment of more than 217,000, the UT System confers more than one-third of the state’s undergraduate degrees, educates almost two-thirds of the state’s health care professionals annually and accounts for almost 70 percent of all research funds awarded to public institutions in Texas. The UT System has an annual operating budget of \$16.9 billion (FY 2016) including \$3 billion in sponsored programs funded by federal, state, local and private sources. With about 20,000 faculty – including Nobel laureates – and more than 70,000 health care professionals, researchers, student advisors and support staff, the UT System is one of the largest employers in the state.

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