

Tanning Bans vs. Personal Freedom?

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“At what point do we become too controlling of our children?” That was the question posed to the proponents of Montana House Bill 456, which was brought before committee on February 22, 2013. This bill seeks in-person parental consent for minors under the age of 18 to use indoor tanning beds. Despite multiple testimonies packed with facts from reputable organizations detailing the dangers of indoor tanning, Montana legislators nevertheless chose not to advance HB 456 out of committee. That action essentially kills the bill for this legislative session.

The hearing was attended by a large group of health care professionals that included DNA members Karrie Fairbrother and Casey Schwantes, dermatologist Dr. Charlotte Kutsch, pathologist Dr. Michael Brown, and many others. Also in attendance were cancer survivors; one a young woman who is battling metastatic melanoma. Though the nurses and physicians offered an abundance of facts about tanning beds and their correlation with skin cancer, it was this young woman with melanoma who appeared to have the greatest impact on the legislators. Her heartbreaking story of her struggles with cancer, her treatment, and the regret of tanning that haunts her daily, had the entire room hanging on her every word.

Known by many as a state that for years had no highway speed limit, Montana has a reputation for being particularly attached to personal freedoms. This reputation proved true once again with the tabling of HB 456. At the hearing, multiple legislators questioned whether this bill “went too far” in its efforts to protect Montana’s youth. These doubts arose despite the revelation that tanning beds have been designated as carcinogens by the World Health Organization, much like tobacco, and potentially as deadly as arsenic. A representative from the Indoor Tanning Association argued that the relationship between tanning beds and skin cancer has been exaggerated. She discussed relative versus absolute risk, which was met with a surprising retort from one legislator. The legislator mentioned that she was in law school when the tobacco companies were being prosecuted and they, too, focused on relative versus absolute risk. It was an unexpected response that left the tanning representative, and the room, quite taken aback.

Montana legislators were also made aware of many who thought this bill did not adequately address the issue. In fact, the American Cancer Society would not offer their support of the bill because of their stance that indoor tanning should be banned for all minors under the age of 18. Unfortunately, that of course was deemed second-place to protection of personal freedom.

The political climate in Montana makes it extremely difficult to pass legislation that isn’t absolutely critical to sustaining the state. However, this doesn’t mean that advocacy is pointless. Though this encounter left DNA members feeling disappointed and frustrated, at least the committee members were educated on the dangers of indoor tanning. We will continue to work on this issue and, as states with indoor tanning regulations become the majority, we hope to see this bill resurrected and Montana youth looking a little less tan and a lot healthier!

