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Leading Health Groups Launch National Campaign for Tobacco-Free Baseball
Major League Baseball Must Finally Protect Players and Kids

WASHINGTON, DC (March 3, 2011) – With spring training for the 2011 baseball season underway, 10 major medical and public health groups have joined together in the launch of a coordinated campaign urging Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association to ban tobacco use by players, managers, coaches and other staff at major league ballparks.

Today, the groups have teamed up to kick off the online campaign featuring a new website, www.tobaccofreebaseball.org, with social media tools that allow fans and other members of the public to tell their hometown teams, players and Major League Baseball that continued use of smokeless tobacco at baseball games is unacceptable. The campaign is called Knock Tobacco Out of the Park.

The groups involved are: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Cancer Society, American Dental Association, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, American Medical Association, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Legacy, Oral Health America and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In Florida last weekend, youth activists rallied and circulated petitions at games between the New York Mets and Atlanta Braves in Port St. Lucie and between the Detroit Tigers and Toronto Blue Jays in Dunedin.

Earlier this month, U.S. Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) called for Major League Baseball and the players association to ban the use of tobacco products at MLB venues. The senators cited Washington Nationals' pitching ace Stephen Strasburg's struggle to overcome his addiction to smokeless tobacco.

In November, the chief executives of the 10 health groups wrote to Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig and Michael Weiner, executive director of the players association, urging that they agree to the tobacco ban in the contract that takes effect in 2012. The new collective bargaining agreement is being negotiated this year.

“Use of smokeless tobacco endangers the health of Major League ballplayers. It also sets a terrible example for the millions of young people who watch baseball at the ballparks and on TV and often see Major League players and managers using smokeless tobacco,” the groups wrote.

The use of smokeless tobacco in Major League Baseball has drawn scrutiny from Congress and the media for months. In April 2010, the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, chaired by Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), held a hearing on the issue.

Several news stories have examined the difficulty players and coaches have in breaking their addiction. Among those who have spoken about the challenge of quitting are Strasburg, American League Most Valuable Player Josh Hamilton and Bruce Bochy, manager of the World Champion San Francisco Giants.

Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn's recent cancer diagnosis and his public comments attributing his disease to years of chewing tobacco have underscored the health threat from smokeless tobacco.

Tobacco use was banned in baseball's minor leagues in 1993. The NCAA and the National Hockey League have instituted prohibitions on tobacco use. Major League Baseball is lagging behind.

Meanwhile, smokeless tobacco use among high school boys is spiking – there has been a 36 percent increase since 2003 and 15 percent of high school boys currently use smokeless tobacco, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Smokeless tobacco contains at least 28 known carcinogens and has been found to cause oral cancer, pancreatic cancer, cardiovascular disease, gum disease, tooth decay and mouth lesions. It has also been linked to other forms of cancer.

More information:

Health groups' letter to Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association:
http://tobaccofreebaseball.org/resources_letter.pdf