

COST OF TOBACCO IS MUCH TOO HIGH



STAFF SGT. JASON EPPERSON/ARMY

The story about the hike in tobacco prices at military exchanges and commissaries ["Tobacco prices rise in DoD Stores" 5/16-5/23], really hit home with those of us who work public health issues every day. Smoking rates in this country have fallen dramatically since U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry issued his report linking smoking and cancer back in 1964.

The military is an exception, where smoking and tobacco use rates far exceed those in the civilian community. The really sad statistic, as is mentioned in the article, is that 38 percent of tobacco users start the habit after joining one of the military services. Increasing tobacco prices at exchanges and commissaries should affect that number in a positive way, as young people are especially price susceptible when it comes to tobacco use.

Studies have shown that a 10 percent increase in tobacco prices leads to a 14 percent reduction in tobacco use. It should be noted that injured smokers

incur a 20 percent longer stay in the hospital and have double the risk of post-surgical infection when compared to non-smokers — so this is a true readiness issue as well as a personal health issue.

According to a March 14, 2014, memo from the assistant secretary for health affairs, "An estimated 175,000 current active duty servicemembers ... will die from smoking unless we can help them quit."

To put that number into perspective, that is more servicemembers than were killed in combat during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan combined. What a preventable loss of life!

Army Col. James T. Currie (ret.)

Executive Director
Commissioned Officers Association of the
U.S. Public Health Service
Landover, Md.