"Protect children from second-hand smoke in cars"

Many of you will have had some experience of the effects of second-hand smoke on children's health in your day-to-day work. According to a study conducted by the Royal College of Physicians, every year second-hand smoke results in more than 165,000 new episodes of disease among children, 300,000 primary care consultations, 9,500 hospital admissions and around 40 sudden infant deaths.

This exposure often occurs in a vehicle. NHS figures reveal that one in five children are regularly being subjected to passive smoking in a car – that equates to two million children across the UK. Yet, many people do not realise second-hand smoke in a car can rise to harmful levels, even with the window open. Research shows that a single cigarette smoked in a moving car with the window half open exposes a child in the centre of the back seat to around two-thirds of the passive smoking effect of the average smoke-filled pub. Levels increase to more than eleven times greater than the effects of second-hand smoke in a smoke-filled pub when the cigarette is smoked in a stationary car with the windows closed.

For the past three years, the British Lung Foundation has been campaigning to introduce a ban on smoking in cars when children are present. This is ultimately a child protection issue; children are particularly vulnerable to passive smoke, as they have smaller lungs and their immune systems are less developed, which makes them more susceptible to respiratory and ear infections triggered by passive smoking. Adults can make their own lifestyle choices but children often can’t.

This November, a debate in the House of Lords could see the introduction of a ban through an amendment to the Children and Families Bill. To raise awareness and encourage the public to write to their MPs in support of a ban, the BLF has released two short videos. To show their support for the campaign, David Harewood and Linda Robson have provided the voices for toddlers, highlighting the need to give a voice to those children who may not otherwise be heard.

Children are often too scared to ask adults to stop smoking. In a BLF-commissioned survey, only 31% of children had asked their parents to stop smoking in a car, with 34% reporting feeling too frightened or embarrassed to do so.

A legislative ban is vital to provide the protection children need and deserve. A comparative case showing the success of legislation alongside awareness campaigns like this is seatbelt use in cars. After legislation was introduced, following several campaigns, rates of seatbelt wearing in the UK rose from 25% to 91%. If a ban on smoking in cars has even half that success, think how many children’s lives it would help.

Health professionals are a key voice in government decision making, as they witness first-hand the effects health policies have on the population. Please watch the videos at www.blf.org.uk/Linda and www.blf.org.uk/David and let your MP know if you support a ban.

Penny Woods is chief executive at the British Lung Foundation

Eileen Shepherd is deputy practice editor of Nursing Times.
eileen.shepherd@emap.com
Twitter @EileenShepherd. Don’t miss the practice blog, go to nursingtimes.net/practiceblog