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Turnpike Tyranny? Lowering Costs By Controlling Behavior

By Gregory L. Schneider

Some of the more despised people in America are not BIG OIL executives or even the grandstanding politicians who spend most of their time scolding them about what the price of gasoline should be. BIG GOVERNMENT is not despised either despite the impact it has on individual liberties and on your pocketbook. BIG TOBACCO is not even the enemy anymore. Remember, they paid off BIG GOVERNMENT and BIG TORT LITIGATORS and admitted their guilt. Now they are free to go. Even BIG FAST FOOD and BIG INSURANCE COMPANIES cannot draw the ire of most Americans these days.

No, the most despised people in America are the little smokers, who are forced to huddle in dark corners to puff away while people shun them as if they were Gollum eating grubbes and worms deep in the Misty Mountains while plotting to steal the ring back from Frodo. They can no longer smoke (in most states—Kansas is still somewhat sensible) within fifteen feet of a building as if some small plume of smoke may waft through the double-paned security glass, drift up forty floors and kill some poor government office worker finding out ways to further hinder smokers from puffing away in public.

Now we have a story posted on the Kansas Health Institute website (www.khi.org) discussing how the Kansas Turnpike Authority board will no longer hire smokers as a way of reducing health care costs. The turnpike authority is a public and private company and Michael Johnston, the Authority president, was quoted saying that employees who smoked used more health care (and drove up health care costs) to the point where health care was now costing the Authority about 10 percent of its revenue.

It is perfectly understandable that Johnston wants to reduce health care costs but he is going about it the wrong way. The story relates how “everyone who is hired by the KTA must sign an affidavit stating that neither they nor their spouse are tobacco users. Once hired, they must consent to random drug tests that in addition to screening for illegal substances detect nicotine.” Drug tests to detect illegal substances are understandable from a law enforcement perspective, but tests which detect a legal product, one funded heavily by BIG GOVERNMENT agricultural subsidies?

A more prudent policy to lower health care costs to employees of the Turnpike would be to give them control over their own health care. We need policies designed to move us away from the archaic employer-sponsored insurance of the past (where costs are borne by the employer who also receives the tax benefit for providing health insurance) to one which empowers the individual consumer to make their own choices regarding health care (and receives the tax

benefit for doing so). If the employee paid for their own health care—let's say through a Health Savings Account—and continued to smoke, then the burden of paying for the habit in medical terms would fall on that individual. Costs of health care would probably decrease as the individual would be able to see the impact of smoking on the increased costs of their own health care and (probably) take action to cease smoking. These policies would put the Turnpike Authority on the fast lane of lowering health care costs.

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