

Proposed smoking ban angers some in military

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A Pentagon-commissioned report urges the Defense Department to ban smoking in the military, even by combat troops in battle zones, a proposal that quickly ignited a controversy among service members.

The study, which was completed late last month by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, recommends closing "the pipeline of new tobacco users entering the military" by prohibiting tobacco use in the service academies and officer-training programs like ROTC and eventually instituting a total ban on all use of tobacco by active-duty personnel.

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McCarter echoed the sentiments of many active-duty and retired military personnel when they learned of the proposed ban this week. Message boards on popular military forums like military.com, armchairgeneral.com and officer.com were burning up with reactions like

“what a CROCK” and “If they really do ban tobacco in the military there are going to be some ****ed off troops.”

Rakeshia Baity, a member of the Kentucky National Guard, doesn't smoke, but she said at a recruitment center in Paducah, Ky.: “That's not right. That's not right at all. “It's your right” to smoke, she said.

The study, led by Stuart Bondurant, a professor of medicine and emeritus dean at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, said smoking and tobacco-related illnesses cost the Pentagon more than \$800 million a year in lost productivity and health care expenses.

The bill for the VA is much higher, it said, saying more than 80 percent of the \$5 billion annual cost of treating pulmonary disease among military retirees was directly attributable to smoking.

The Defense Department already restricts smoking on military installations, much in the same way airports and other public buildings set aside designated smoking areas. But smoking in the military remains much more common in the military than in the general public, the report found — smokers have dropped to only about one in five Americans overall, but they make up more than one in three service members.

While the Pentagon offers quit-smoking programs, “tobacco control does not have a high priority” in the Pentagon or at the VA, the report charged. “Neither department has instituted a comprehensive tobacco-control program.”

The report particularly criticized the Pentagon for selling cigarettes and similar products at a discount at many military installations, which the report called “unfortunate” and a “contradiction.”

“The committee believes that [the Pentagon] should not be selling products that are known to impair military readiness and health,” it said. But it noted that such sales are protected by Congress, a provision it called on lawmakers to overturn.

If the monetary costs of smoking don't get the attention of Pentagon brass, the report also identified what it said was a “strong association between tobacco addiction and mental-health problems, among them mood disorders, schizophrenia and substance abuse” — not exactly the state that generals and admirals want their gun-toting charges to be in.

The bottom line, it said, is that while the Pentagon and the VA have made strides toward reducing smoking and chewing, “tobacco use continues to impair military readiness.”

