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Consequences of Inconsistency in Air Force Tobacco Control Policy

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Abstract

Objectives—Although the United States Air Force (USAF) has been a leader in efforts to reduce tobacco use among service members, tobacco continues to be a problem and initiatives to decrease tobacco use further require buy-in from leadership. We explored line leaderships' perspectives on tobacco.

Methods—A diverse group of 10 senior commissioned and 10 non-commissioned personnel were interviewed.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

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Results—Respondents reported substantial changes in the culture of tobacco use during their years of service, from near ubiquity to restricted use areas. They also perceived mixed messages coming from the USAF, including simultaneous discouragement of and accommodations for tobacco use, and variability in policies and enforcement. Many respondents indicated that allowing tobacco use creates conflict and undermines military discipline and suggested that a tobacco-free policy would be the best way to eliminate these contradictions.

Conclusion—Although there has been substantial movement away from a culture of tobacco in the USAF, current policies and variable enforcement of these policies create unnecessary contradictions. Establishing a tobacco-free service would resolve these issues in addition to improving the health of service members and veterans.

Keywords

tobacco; United States Air Force; smoking accommodations; tobacco control policy; enforcement of smoking restrictions

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States (US).¹ In addition to its long-term health effects, tobacco use has been linked to shorter-term impacts of particular concern to the military, including reduced fitness, impaired night vision, and problems with wound healing.^{2,3} Over the last 30 years, there have been efforts to reduce smoking among service members^{4–7} beginning with banning tobacco use in certain places.⁸ Today, tobacco use is prohibited in all indoor areas and inside government vehicles (including automobiles, aircraft, the interior of ships, and on submarines).² Moreover, service members can access state-of-the-art cessation services. Designated tobacco use areas are limited and kept at a distance from buildings.

A 2009 Institute of Medicine report recommended a complete, phased ban on tobacco use in the military.² Yet overall prevalence of tobacco use among military personnel continues to outstrip prevalence in the civilian population.^{2,9–13} Although the proposal for a tobacco-free military has not been taken up, in 2016, following a comprehensive review of tobacco policy, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter released a new instruction (Memorandum 16-001, Department of Defense Tobacco Policy) which established the following policies: (1) all areas not specifically designated tobacco use areas were to be considered smoke-free by default; (2) prices in military stores should match community prices, including all applicable taxes; and (3) the Secretaries of the services should improve their prevention and cessation programs and review efforts to establish tobacco-free housing.¹⁴ These policies should be fully implemented in 2017.

Among the armed services, the United States Air Force (USAF) has been a leader in creating cultural changes around the use of tobacco. The USAF has some of the lowest tobacco use rates in all of the armed forces, particularly among officers.^{8,15} In addition, Air Force instruction on tobacco use asserts that the goal of the Air Force is to be “tobacco free”,¹⁶ which is unique among all the services in the Department of Defense (DoD). Yet, tobacco use continues to be a problem, and there is no specific plan for achieving that goal.

The Air Force is also restricted by congressional oversight in its ability to create and implement policy furthering the goal of a tobacco-free service. Prior efforts by armed services or the Department of Defense to raise tobacco prices,¹⁷ prohibit sales¹⁸ or encourage cessation¹⁹ have been overturned consistently by the House Armed Services Committee, which often claims to be protecting service members' "right" to use tobacco. Dramatically changing policy would require, at minimum, cooperation or non-interference from Congress. However, the impetus for such change likely will have to come from the services and from the Department of Defense.

Previous research has shown that some service members believe that strong tobacco control policy is impossible or impractical.²⁰ Changing this, and creating new cultural norms surrounding tobacco, will require buy-in from "line" leadership (including senior commissioned and non-commissioned officers), who are responsible for the consistent implementation of policy. Line leadership exercise general command authority and are eligible for operational command positions. This study examined the perspectives of the line leadership through interviews with officers and senior enlisted personnel.

METHODS

Recruitment

We worked with a consultant within the USAF Medical Operations Agency (AFMOA) to recruit a purposive, diverse, influential, and high-ranking group of line officers including senior commissioned officers (CO; O4–O6) and non-commissioned officers (NCO; E7–E9) personnel for in-depth, key informant interviews. Potential participants were contacted through AFMOA and we interviewed the first 20 (10 Officer, 10 NCO) who volunteered. Participants were provided no incentives, as military institutional review boards (IRBs) discourage it.

Participants

There were 20 participants in this study, half NCOs and half field grade officers. Table 1 shows the characteristics of participants.

Procedures

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed by knowledge experts in the field of tobacco and the military. Interviews, conducted by telephone by at least 2 people on the research team, lasted 20 – 45 minutes and were audio-recorded. The recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analyses were conducted by iteratively reviewing the transcribed interviews to compare and contrast participant perspectives and identify broad themes, which were then reviewed and discussed further in the research team. Saturation of themes was reached in the 20 interviews, with considerable thematic overlap found in transcribed text. Once consensus on the predominant themes was reached, the results were categorized further by topic and an interpretive account developed that accounted for variation in perspectives.

RESULTS

Changes to Regulations

Both officers and NCOs reported seeing much change in the culture of tobacco use in their years of service. Some entered the USAF when there were few regulations regarding tobacco use and reported that, over time, norms around tobacco use had shifted. The culture change was so significant that in some situations, “no smoking” signs were reportedly no longer required. For example, one officer noted that “everybody kind of knows ... Those are all these kind of socially-accepted norms.” Another pointed out that “in government facilities like here on this base, you don’t see signs saying no smoking... ‘cause we just know you don’t. ...It’s just a known fact.”

These comments illustrate how smoking has been effectively denormalized: the “common knowledge” and interpretation of tobacco use has changed over the past few decades, from a situation where smoking was tolerated if not encouraged almost everywhere to one where it is no longer considered part of the everyday landscape.

Mixed Messages

Despite these cultural changes, respondents also referenced mixed messages from the USAF, including the most basic contradiction between requiring physical fitness and permitting tobacco use. An officer pointed out that “the military emphasizes the physical conditioning and taking care of yourself. And [tobacco use is] contrary to that.” He also pointed out the inconsistency of having “a leader or a supervisor that is trying to emphasize physical conditioning and making healthy choices [who is] smoking or using other tobacco products.”

Participants also said that selling tobacco on installations undermined military health messages. A number of interviewees mentioned that the lower price of tobacco on base as compared with that in civilian stores encouraged purchase. An officer noted that “the other thing that you see is -- that’s plain as day -- is selling cigarettes on base. But at the same time... the Air Force tries to discourage ... tobacco use ... so what I see is, contradictory policies.” An NCO remarked that, when it came to health, “we talk the talk, but we sell [tobacco products] cheaper on base than they are downtown ... I wish we didn’t do that, because we’re talking out of both sides of our mouth.” He concluded ruefully that the Air Force “is a business, and they want to make money. So, I guess ... we do it at the cost of our airmen.”

Other, less systemic contradictions also were noted. Between bases, and even within the same base, differences were seen in how leaders dealt with tobacco and tobacco cessation efforts. An NCO described the attitude of some officers to tobacco control as, “‘Okay, whatever.’ And, you know, they left it to the enlisted leaders to implement and to enforce.” An officer thought that at his current installation “we have a very good policy here with tobacco-cessation classes. And they encourage airmen to attend and make it -- try to make it easy for them.” But he had heard that at other places, supervisors “looked at it as, ‘well, if you’re going to do this, this is going to be on your own time. I mean you cannot... take duty time’. [They] looked at it ... not as a readiness issue but a personal issue.”

Variability in Policy and Enforcement

NCOs and officers also noted variability in the way regulations were created and enforced within and across installations. The variations appeared to originate with leadership. An NCO said that “how the leadership feels may play a role in how those regulations [are] used or interpreted ... we can have a lot of these programs out there and a lot of these things that talk this, but it kinda is for naught if you’re in an environment, or in an organization, or somewhere where again someone doesn’t really hold that view.” The officers and NCOs themselves described differences in the extent to which they enforced tobacco use regulations. The majority of NCOs and officers reported enforcing regulations, but others reported that tobacco use simply wasn’t one of their priorities. An officer remarked that “most of my time and energy was spent with -- dealing with issues a lot more serious than tobacco.” Others were more dismissive about specific rules. An NCO thought it was “ludicrous to say, ‘You can only be in this six-by-six square to smoke’ ... I think those are unrealistic expectations but those are the ones that are approved.”

The problem with this variability, as one officer noted, was that “it doesn’t give ... a military member ... a consistent message on what the Air Force’s position is on tobacco.” That lack of dedication also was reflected by another officer, who said that in his experience, “Never once has a leader ever said, ‘Hey, commanders. We need you to curb tobacco use and to ... help educate your airmen in concert with the medical folks ... on the harms of tobacco use and how it impacts military readiness.’ That has never been brought up.”

Social Tensions

Respondents said that restricting tobacco use to particular times and places, and creating accommodations to comply with those policies, created resentment and frustration among supervisors and non-tobacco using service members. For supervisors, the issue was that time taken to use tobacco during work shifts was time taken away from work. An NCO commented, “I don’t know what they’re authorized for breaks, but... if they take 2 or 3 of those a day and they’re 10 minutes... that’s... 30 or 40 minutes of work productivity lost.... [There are] definitely inefficiencies in smoking.” Another emphasized the impact of the restrictions: “Well, now all of a sudden, smoke breaks became something where people left. And so we just lost people for a 20 minute walk ... through three guarded gates to get to wherever it was they were going to smoke. Well, it took a freaking 20 minutes to walk there. And, then they’d smoke for ten minutes. And, it turns into a BS session. Well, none of that’s changed. You still have to go and now you go 50 feet away from any building on a base And, I mean, smoke breaks aren’t ten minute breaks. They’re really more like half hour breaks.”

Supervisors also noted that even while they were working, smokers might be thinking about their next tobacco break, so that the job was no longer the first priority. An NCO described this phenomenon, saying, “it’s on their mind too. ‘When’s the next smoke break? When am I going to get to smoke next? What if I get this job done quicker? Umm, can I catch a smoke in between launches? Once we get the airplanes off the ground ... I’m going to go hit the smoke pit before I have to go and talk to the flight chief’.” An officer concurred, saying, “I’ve seen a crew dog land after an 11-1/2- hour flight and, you know, the only thing on his

mind was getting to that cigarette, and this is ahead of other duties that were still on his list. ... That was all subordinate to his number one desire, which was to find a place to light up and smoke.” Thus, smoking regularly distracted from work priorities.

The ability of smokers to take breaks, when nonsmokers could not, created what one NCO described as: “a bit of animosity.” An officer described this as “an annoyance,” noting that if nonsmokers said, “‘hey, I’m just going to go sit over here for a while just to sit’ ... somebody might get really upset. But it’s okay for the smokers.” This created inconsistencies in the working conditions of those who smoked and those who did not that contributed to tension in the workplace. This attitude was confirmed by an officer who said “if somebody says, ‘Hey, I’d like to just sit down here for five minutes’ ... the answer would be, ‘Well, no. Get back to work.’ And somebody ... right after ... said, ‘Hey, I’m gonna go catch a smoke.’ ‘Sure.’ ... You know, ‘cause it’s cruel and unusual punishment for me not to let him go.”

Effects on Military Discipline

Despite the accommodations made for smoking, many officers and NCOs mentioned that allowing tobacco use appeared to permit, if not actually promote, the bending or breaking of rules, particularly by smokeless tobacco users, thereby undermining military discipline. An NCO asserted that Missileers (personnel who operate Intermediate Range and Intercontinental ballistic missile systems) spent a lot of time driving to and from their duty stations: “A lot of them will chew because they are in trucks... You’re not supposed to chew in government vehicles, but these guys are on the road.” Similarly, another NCO commented that “on the flight line... sometimes you can’t tell if [smokeless tobacco is] in the mouth or not. So, you know, it’s easier for those guys to maintain.” Disciplining airmen for smokeless use could also be problematic: An officer reported that “It seems like usually when you have to call somebody on it, they’re not happy about it. ... you never get the, ‘well, yeah, you caught me fair and square. I did wrong’. It’s usually, ‘well, who’s it really hurting, so it’s a dumb rule’ kind of reaction.” Smokers could be similarly resistant to discipline: An NCO reported that “When I tell them to stop smoking on their balconies, they say, ‘Yes, sir.’ But, you know they’re upset, because they’re, you know, ‘I don’t want to go stand out in the rain and smoke,’ or, ‘I don’t want to go over across the street to smoke when I could smoke right on the balcony here.’” Thus, smoking was regarded as interfering with smooth operations under military discipline. An NCO said, “I think using tobacco and putting yourself in a situation where you’ve got to take yourself out of work or you have to get away from the job or...break rules, that has a negative effect on what we’re trying to do.”

Smokers were known to break rules, even such long-standing ones as the prohibition on indoor smoking. One officer said, “it seems like as long as I’ve been in the Air Force, where there’s a will, there’s a way. Some folks will find a way to smoke inside if the weather’s really crummy or whatever, even though they know they’re not supposed to.” Another officer pointed out an even more problematic issue with smokers in secure facilities: “There’s kind of always that back door where they can step out and smoke. And that ... leaves a less than secure entrance into the facility... : ‘Well, hey, oh yeah, I was just out here

smoking. Can you let me in?' 'Oh sure.'" Although he said he could not "give you active examples of ... having that happen," he continued, "If I were to try and get into a facility, I'd go check out and see where the smokers were hanging out... Because there's probably a pretty easy access back in."

Establishing a Tobacco-Free Service

Many of the NCOs and officers asserted that the only way to deal effectively with the problems created by tobacco use would be to enact a total ban on tobacco use. They felt this type of ban was both realistic and sensible. An officer said: "I think the military really does have more control over mitigating or rather reducing tobacco than they give themselves credit for." Another concurred, suggesting that "So if you want to ban smoking completely, ban tobacco completely, it will probably still happen. ... You'll have some really unhappy people, like I said, for probably 10 years or so. But then the culture will eventually change." An NCO agreed with this assessment, remarking that "in 10 or 15 years, I think the military will be smoke-free... or tobacco free... And at the end of the day when you look at the costs that are associated with you know, cancer treatments and emphysema and just chronic disease that's associated with tobacco use, I think they could very easily justify or justifiably institute it." Concerns about "rights" of smokers were of secondary importance to one NCO, who situated such a policy in the larger context of military discipline: "we're here to preserve democracy, not practice it."

DISCUSSION

Consistency in discipline and clarity of regulations are military ideals. In the past, when tobacco was allowed everywhere and cigarettes were part of combat rations, it was easy to maintain consistency in policies surrounding tobacco use. Today, regulations have become less clear and discipline more difficult as the military attempts both to discourage tobacco use to protect its mission and the health of its members, while accommodating tobacco users by supplying smoking areas and permitting breaks to use them. The USAF has a stated goal of becoming tobacco free,¹⁶ yet respondents in this study reported mixed messages, contradictory policies, and a lack of strong leadership on the issue. These contradictions mean that attempts to break the rules are common and mid-level commanders (both officers and NCOs) who are largely responsible for enforcing regulations must spend valuable time trying to enforce the rules. Some officers and NCOs may strictly enforce regulations and others may flout them with their own tobacco use.

According to these leaders in today's USAF, whereas at one time and, in some services still today, tobacco served as a social lubricant, creating social opportunities that eased tensions between enlisted and officers,²¹ tobacco has now become a source of social tension that creates challenges for maintaining military discipline. The variability in tobacco use and the allowances given to tobacco users breeds resentment among the vast majority of airmen who don't use tobacco. Participants reported that smokers were allowed more and longer breaks than nonsmokers, and that requests for breaks for reasons other than smoking were less likely to be honored. Tobacco users also were described by participants as willing to break rules to use tobacco, and often focused on the next time they could use, rather than the task at hand.

Restrictions on tobacco use by the USAF and its goal to become tobacco-free were supported by many of the officers and NCOs interviewed. They provided good reasons for supporting a complete ban on tobacco use as a condition of service. Among these were the mixed messages being sent by allowing tobacco use, the healthcare costs to the military from those who use tobacco, and the costs and workplace tensions created by accommodating smoking breaks when the force is being downsized. Participants believed that such a policy would eventually be completely accepted, as new recruits would have no expectation that tobacco use would be permitted. Concerns about abrogating a “right” to smoke, which have been raised in the past²⁰ were placed in the context of military discipline, which disallows many civilian liberties.

Limitations

This study has limitations. The small convenience sample does not permit generalization to all line leaders in the USAF. Leaders more supportive of tobacco control may have been more willing than others to volunteer, creating unidentified bias in responses. Further, only one leader who was a current smoker participated, limiting understanding of how those who smoke may differ in their perspectives. However, as the first study to explore these issues among line leadership in the USAF, our study provides insights into how the changing social norms around tobacco use within the service with the lowest tobacco prevalence have shaped new contradictions and conflicts that have the potential to disrupt military discipline.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TOBACCO REGULATION

Just as in the civilian world, cultural change in how tobacco use is viewed has occurred in the military sector over the last 30 years. Officers and NCOs described the current socially-accepted norms around tobacco use, including widespread understanding that tobacco use is less acceptable and more regulated. For example, the fact that “no smoking” signs were described as being no longer needed because it is assumed that smoking is permitted only in designated areas signals a significant shift from a time when use was ubiquitous and the absence of signs meant that smoking was permitted.

Whereas the military remains under congressional oversight, some potentially effective policy changes have been enacted, including Memorandum 16-001.¹⁴ This policy has apparently met with no objection from Congress, illustrating the ability of the DoD to initiate policy change. It remains to be seen how effectively and consistently the policy changes of Memorandum 16-001 will be implemented and enforced. However, ending tobacco in the USAF likely will require additional strong leadership from the top echelons, including the Secretaries of Defense and of the USAF, supported by civilian-side advocacy, to provide a countervailing force against tobacco industry influence and persuade Congress that such a policy would be to the benefit of the service and the country. It also will require well-publicized plans with a specific date on which tobacco use would no longer be permitted. This research suggests that such a move is feasible and could be welcomed by many officers and NCOs as a way to improve fitness and reduce the tensions created by policy incongruities.

Human Subjects Statement

Study procedures were approved by institutional review boards at the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., the University of California, San Francisco, and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Active Duty United States Air Force Line Leadership Interviewees (N=20)

Characteristic	N	Mean±SD or %
Gender (% male)	16	80.0%
Race (%)		
Caucasian	17	85.0%
African American	3	15.0%
Hispanic/Latino Descent (% yes)	1	5.0%
Length of Military Service (years)		23.8±4.3
Rank/Grade (%)		
Officers (O4–O6)	10	50.0%
Senior Enlisted (E7–E9)	10	50.0%
Tobacco Use Status (%)		
Never User	9	45.0%
Past User	10	50.0%
Current User	1	5.0%