**What’s Wrong with this Picture?**

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Life is absolutely full of strange contradictions that have become so invasive that some are seen as undeniable truths that resist every effort to straighten them out. For example, I recently drove past one of our town’s tobacco shops that has been determined as an “essential service” during these days of enforced social distancing caused by COVID-19. Entering the store, that has a primary mission of selling tobacco products, was a women wearing a colorful, obviously homemade, face mask. My immediate thought was, “What’s wrong with this picture?” Here was an individual entering a tobacco shop wearing a device to protect her respiratory system from the relatively low risk of catching a virus to buy a carton of cigarettes.

According to the National Centers for Health Statistics, 655,381 Americans died in 2018 from heart disease with smoking being a major contributing factor. In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that 450,000 Americans died from smoking, including 49,000 due to second hand smoke. According to the CDC, tobacco use is the leading cause of death in the U.S. and that currently, 16 million Americans suffer from smoking-related illnesses. It is also clear from the growing evidence related to the mortality rates associated with COVID-19, that smoking-related diseases that have compromised the immunity of its victims are significant contributing factors.

On the discussions taking place about the impact that COVID-19 is having on agriculture, shouldn’t there at least be some attention given to the role that smoking and it’s related health effects are having on the high mortality rates? It may not be our responsibility to tell farmers how they should live, or what personal choices they should, or should not, make, however, to ignore how smoking fits into the COVID-19 equation is simply bad science. However, we should not compartmentalize and at least look at the health and safety behaviors of those we serve more holistically, or as an integral part of their lives.

For example, we cannot focus on the unguarded components of a piece of farm machinery or the hazards of an agricultural chemical, and not address the added risk that exposure to these hazards can have while under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Also, we can’t in good faith, criticize a farmer for cleaning moldy corn out of a bin without wearing an N-95 respirator and then remain silent when they smoke non-stop during a farm visit, or smoke in an enclosed setting with their children present. At least, they should be informed that such behavior may make them more vulnerable to COVID-19, and places them at a higher risk of life threatening complications.

For some reason, and not a very good evidence-based one at that, we have placed a firewall between our consideration of unsafe farm work practices and unhealthy personal choices. This neglect is comparable to failing to inform farmers that it is a well-documented fact that a tractor equipped with roll over protection (ROPS) reduces the risk of dying in the event of a tractor overturn, or that walking on crusted grain can cause an entrapment in grain, or working with anhydrous ammonia without safety goggles can result in blindness. With a little diplomacy and nonjudgmental approach, it shouldn’t be too painful to at least have a conversation with family members and friends on the effects, both short and long-term, from smoking.

Once all the dust has settled, and life returns somewhat to normal, one of the lessons we might learn from COVID-19 is that a lot of its impact could be attributed to personal choices that made us more vulnerable to this microscopic pest from Wuhan. It might also reaffirm the old saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.