

OUR OPINION

Adopt reasonable limits on cold remedy sales

Making it tougher for illegal drug traffickers to manufacture the addictive stimulant methamphetamine in Wisconsin is a good idea.

But cracking down on meth production by giving central authorities the power to track the purchase of cold medications by law-abiding citizens is a threatening prospect.

That is why Wisconsin lawmakers should remove from a package of anti-methamphetamine legislation a plan to require consumers to show identification and sign a registry before purchasing the cold medication pseudoephedrine.

As we have declared before, methamphetamine — also known as meth, crank, speed, ice, glass and poor man's cocaine — is a scourge that poses hazards to human health and the environment. It is a highly addictive drug linked to brain-cell damage and to violent acts. It is produced in makeshift labs in homes, hotel rooms and abandoned buildings, as well as some large operations in California and Mexico, by combining several chemicals dangerous to people and the environment.

The Midwest, including northern and western Wisconsin, has been a hotbed of meth production, in part because of the availability of anhydrous ammonia, a farm fertilizer, and abandoned rural buildings.

It is time for Wisconsin to join other states in taking stronger action to shut down meth manufacturers.

Legislators this spring have been putting together a package of legislation to attack meth production. One focus has been pseudoephedrine, a cold remedy sold over-the-counter under brand names such as Sudafed and Sinutab.

Pseudoephedrine is a prime ingredient of meth. The unrestricted sale of pseudoephedrine is an invitation for smaller meth manufacturers to buy or shoplift the product to feed their labs.

Some of the restrictions lawmakers have proposed are reasonable. For exam-

Requiring consumers to show a photo ID and sign a registry to buy pseudoephedrine goes too far.

ple, requiring pseudoephedrine products to be placed behind store counters or locked in cabinets and limiting the purchase of the products to two or three packages at a time are reasonable ways to discourage meth makers.

But also proposed is a requirement that any purchaser of pseudoephedrine show photo identification and sign a registry. That restriction is unreasonable.

The goal of the ID requirement and registry is to track purchases to determine if anyone is buying pseudoephedrine at multiple locations to accumulate enough for a meth lab. But without an electronic database capable of tracking purchases across all drug stores, there is no way to prevent a meth maker from buying at multiple stores. Meth manufacturers are also likely to evade the restriction with fake IDs or by using more than one individual to make purchases.

Meanwhile, the ID requirement and registry impose a cost on America's civil liberties. The registry forces law-abiding consumers to identify themselves as users of pseudoephedrine, a perfectly legal product. The result is a curtailment of freedom and invasion of privacy.

Lawmakers ought to ask: Will the consumer who buys a couple of extra packages of Sudafed to take on a vacation end up under investigation?

The seriousness of meth production has persuaded several states to adopt the ID and registry restriction. Illinois, however, rejected the ID and registry in favor of limits on product display and on the number of packages sold to any individual. Wisconsin ought to follow the Illinois model.

The state should make it tougher for meth manufacturers, but lawmakers should avoid threats to the freedoms of law-abiding consumers.



YOUR VIEWS

Metro problems are pervasive

Regarding Madison Metro, it isn't just a problem with school-age teens who hang out at the South Transfer Point. Problems surrounding the buses are more pervasive than what occurs at transfer points.

Youths shout vulgarities and act with no regard or respect for fellow passengers. And drivers are powerless to do anything except stop the bus and call the police. This is an inconvenience to all passengers. Customer comfort falls directly on the drivers, yet they are powerless to do anything due to the restrictions of their schedules and being made to feel as though they are committing "hate crimes" if they ask passengers to behave.

In a constant effort to be "politically correct," the residents of Madison enable the "oppressed" (either by race or economics) to behave badly. Manners are not honored and respect is paid to few authority figures. If one screams "prejudice" in this town, they are allowed to commit infractions of acceptable behavior.

Madison is a somewhat decentralized city and is not unlike New York in this aspect. Uniformed police officers regularly ride buses in New York, simply to show their solidarity and make their presence known. This is unplanned; beat cops just get on and off the buses at will. I realize very few police walk a beat here, but if they manned booths at the transfer points, the problems on the buses could be eradicated.

When I lived in New York, I never witnessed the malevolent behavior I do on Madison buses. Of course, New York is a level playing field where those disadvantaged by race, creed or economics have no more rights than anyone else. No one enables anyone to misbehave.

— Krista Kay, Madison

Don't change military ballot status

The May 1 editorial against the proposed voter ID bill could have added these details: The bill will cost the state \$1 million per year, according to its attached fiscal note. There are better ways to spend money.

The bill requires absentee ballots to include a photocopy of identification with the ballots. How many homebound people have ready access to copy machines? How many absentee ballots will be rejected because the identification copy was not included or was judged inadequate? And what will happen to all of those copies of identification? This may become another avenue for ID theft.

However, your stance in favor of accepting late ballots from the military is misguided. It would violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution by setting up a special class of voters. In voting, everyone should be equal. The April 2005 issue of Election Law Journal contains a detailed article about a recent controversy concerning late military ballots. It details coercion of election officials and circumstantial evidence of voter fraud. It refutes the myth that the military needs or

Election holiday?

State Rep. Joe Parisi, D-Madison, is pushing a bill in the Legislature to make November Election Days in even-numbered years state holidays. Parisi says this would ease the 5 p.m. crush at the polls by giving students and state workers more time to vote during the day, plus make state workers available to help at the polls.

We welcome readers' views, which will be featured in an upcoming Spectrum section, of 200 or fewer words. Please submit your thoughts by Wednesday morning.

◆ E-mail: wjopine@madison.com. No attachments, please.

◆ Call: 283-3123 in Madison; 888-696-8675 elsewhere.

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should have a privileged position when it comes to voting. A better solution is using a write-in ballot, created by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986. This can be sent to an overseas voter well in advance of the time that a final ballot is printed.

The best solution is for all of us to pay more attention to election procedures and ensure that election laws are carefully crafted and administered.

— Paul Malischke, Madison

Monroe neighborhood hit again

Thursday, for the second time in two months, I read an unflattering and untrue depiction of my neighborhood. Susan Lampert Smith assumes that because there are sensitive issues to address in this neighborhood, we're a bunch of "goodie two shoes" residents in an "affluent neighborhood" who always want a hand-out.

I have no vested interest in the two issues, but I have lived in my home here for 31 years. The Ken Kopps store didn't go out of business "because the residents didn't shop there." Kopps retired! My son worked there for five years, and the store was always busy. Customers were let in the store at closing time just to grab that needed gallon of milk.

Many of us purchased our homes more than 30 years ago because we liked the house and neighborhood and it was affordable, not because we were rich or it had a strong neighborhood association. It's just an ordinary neighborhood of single-bathroom, aging furnace and tiny-yard homes and is unfortunately now becoming unaffordable. Don't publicly humiliate us because we love our homes.

— Denise Buenzli, Madison

GUEST COLUMN

Invest wisely to modernize power system

By Mark O'Connell

Recent outcries about the rising cost of energy in Wisconsin remind me of that line from the movie "Casablanca" delivered by Claude Rains, as Captain Reynaud, when informed that there is gambling going on.

"I'm shocked! Shocked!" exclaimed Reynaud while all the other regulars rolled their eyes and watched him pocket his winnings.

Energy costs have gone up in Wisconsin. But everyone familiar with our energy

needs, our planning process and our history knows why they have gone up. None of those folks should be claiming they are "shocked!"

The recent increases in Wisconsin's energy costs are the direct result of four things. First, we are paying to rebuild, expand and modernize Wisconsin's transmission and generation systems so they can provide the power our residents and businesses need and the reliability the government requires.

Second, our in-state generation systems can't meet growing demand and must import more power. We can only access that external power via transmission lines, and because our transmission system is so limited, we are not always able to access the least expensive power.

Third, public concern about coal-fired generation has led to increased reliance on the more environmentally friendly but also more expensive power generated by wind, solar and natural gas.

Last, we are paying more for energy today because we provide numerous avenues for those who oppose projects to delay the construction of transmission and generation systems.

When it comes to the relationship between economic development and our energy costs, three items are crucial to understanding where we find ourselves. First, we had a price advantage for a long time because while other states were investing in and paying for important energy infrastructure improvements, Wisconsin was not.

Second, despite the investments we are making, Wisconsin is not anywhere near the top in costs nationally. We are higher than some of the states in our immediate region, but Illinois and Michigan rates are lower because they have temporary rate freezes in place. Other states are in the process of having to make some of the same investments we have, and as they do, their costs will rise.

Third, and much more important to our economic development capacity, is the question of how competitive we would be if we did not modernize and expand our energy infrastructure. How likely are major businesses to bring their jobs and taxes to a state that cannot guarantee them a reliable source of energy? How likely are they to move to, or expand in, a state where limited transmission capacity may deny them access to the most affordable power?

Wisconsin desperately needs more energy. But no one should support unnecessary or unwise investments in our energy infrastructure. If we don't need it, let's not build it. If we can build it with greater cost-efficiency, let's make sure we do.

But, let's not allow bad information or cheap rhetoric to interfere with Wisconsin's ability to pursue the policies that will ensure its residents and its businesses stable, affordable, reliable access to the power it needs.

O'Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, is chairman of the Energy Wise Coalition, which includes Alliant Energy, American Transmission Co., the Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the Wisconsin Merchants Federation and the Wisconsin Realtors Association.



O'Connell

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The future of news: Blogs, rumors and random thoughts?

The year is 2014. The press as we know it no longer exists. Traditional reporting has collapsed. News is churned out by the media giant Googlezon. (Google has taken over many companies and joined forces with Amazon.)

The news consists of blogs, attitudes, discoveries, preferences, claims and random thoughts, gathered and shaped by computers and a few human editors, then fed back to ordinary people who produce the continuing conversation. The New York Times is off the Internet. It still publishes, but the newspaper has become a newsletter read only by the elite and the elderly.

This is the finding of a clever, eight-minute mock documentary, "EPIC 2014," produced by the fictional Museum of Media History (in reality, journalists Matt Thompson of The Fresno Bee and Robin Sloan of Current, a new cable news channel in San Francisco). Thompson and Sloan recently added a short section taking the story up to 2015.

The mockumentary is start-



JOHN LEO

ing to reach a mass audience at a time of unusually high anxiety for the news industry. The news business has been hobbled by a string of scandals and credibility problems. Skirmishes between reporters and bloggers seem like the beginning of a long war between old media and new. Newspaper publishers are nervous — some would say paralyzed with fright — over polls showing that young adults are not reading papers.

Their audience is dying off. A lot of young people say they get their news from a brief look at headline news or from late-night comedians.

Rupert Murdoch, speaking at the recent convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, advised the members to encourage their

readers to use the Internet more as a supplement to print coverage. Newspapers, he warned, risk being "relegated to the status of also-rans" if they don't make use of the Internet.

Columnist Richard Brookhiser had a blunt comment in the New York Observer: Murdoch was just being polite — what he meant is that newspapers are dead. The older electronic media are nervous, too. According to Advertising Age, Google and Yahoo! will take in as much ad money this year as the prime-time revenues of the three major networks combined. Another sign of the times: Bloggers are now trying to set up a consortium to draw heavy advertising themselves. In the mockumentary, the new electronic media basically blow away the old by paying attention to what people want, most of which would be called soft news or non-news today.

In 2006, the mockumentary reports, Google combines its services — including Gmail, Blogger and Google News — into the Google Grid, which provides limitless storage space and bandwidth for stor-

ing and sharing media. In 2010, Google defeats Microsoft in the news wars (no actual news organizations are involved in the conflict).

In March 2014, Googlezon produces EPIC, the Evolving Personalized Information Construct. "Everyone contributes now — from blog entries to phone-cam images, to video reports, to full investigations," the video says. Everyone is a news producer as well as a news consumer. Computers strip and splice items, adjusting for each user's needs and preferences. News is prioritized according to the number of users who read each item. There are no gatekeepers who decide what we should see and which items are more important than others.

The video appears to be an unusually dry satire, but taken at face value, most of it is plausible — and scary.

Without gatekeepers, no one stands ready to verify reports as accurate, so there's no difference between real news and agreed-upon gossip or low-level fluff. Issues debated today — Are bloggers real journalists? Is there a clear line

between news and entertainment? — would be irrelevant. Everyone would be a journalist. And though some contributors would be paid, it isn't clear that the flow of money would be enough to fund complicated reports and investigations. Reporters would be paid according to how popular their stories were. Good luck if your job is to cover Rwanda or global warming.

In pointedly ponderous tones, the mockumentary breaks into one of those on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand analyses that we all love to hate. At best, we are told, EPIC is deeper, broader and more nuanced than anything seen before. On the other hand, a lot of EPIC is shallow, trivial and untrue.

"But EPIC is what we wanted, it is what we chose, and its commercial success pre-empted any discussions of media and democracy or journalistic ethics."

"EPIC 2014" is a very sharp bit of media analysis. Check it out at www.robinsloan.com/epic.

Leo writes for U.S. News & World Report.