

Smoking more dangerous than previously thought

By Denise Grady, New York Times

However bad you thought smoking was, it's even worse.

A new study adds at least five diseases and 60,000 deaths a year to the toll taken by tobacco in the United States. Before the study, smoking was already blamed for nearly half a million deaths a year in this country from 21 diseases, including 12 types of cancer.

The new findings are based on health data from nearly a million people who were followed for 10 years. In addition to the well-known hazards of lung cancer, artery disease, heart attacks, chronic lung disease and stroke, the researchers found that smoking was linked to significantly increased risks of infection, kidney disease, intestinal disease caused by inadequate blood flow, and heart and lung ailments not previously attributed to tobacco.

Even though people are already barraged with messages about the dangers of smoking, researchers say it is important to let the public know that there is yet more bad news.

"The smoking epidemic is still ongoing, and there is a need to evaluate how smoking is hurting us as a society, to support clinicians and policy making in public health," said Brian D. Carter, an epidemiologist at the American Cancer Society and the first author of an article about the study, which appears in the New England Journal of Medicine. "It's not a done story."

Read the whole story

PG&E outage affects Sierra-at-Tahoe, Meyers

Updated Feb. 15 11:45am:

Sierra was able to operate on generators when the power failure occurred and never had to stop operations. Power was back on by 5am Sunday.

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An underground failure has knocked out power to residents and businesses in the Echo Summit area, including the upper lifts of Sierra-at-Tahoe.

The outage started about 3:10pm Feb. 14. Power is expected to be restored by 8am Feb. 15. Initially 49 customers were without power, as of 9:30pm seven were in the dark.

No one from the ski resort was available for comment. It is not known if the outage affected the resort on Saturday.

JD Guidi with PG&E told *Lake Tahoe News*, "We will be working the Echo summit ski resort area behind the lodge (to fix the problem)."

For about 30 minutes Liberty Utilities customers in Meyers were also without power on Saturday night. This is because Liberty supplies PG&E with power to Echo Summit area as well as a ways down Highway 50.

"They have a reclosure that should have isolated us from that," Randy Kelly with Liberty told *Lake Tahoe News*. This means PG&E outages are not supposed to affect Liberty customers.

Study: Amount of plastic in oceans rising

By John Schwartz, New York Times

Nearly 8 million metric tons of plastic waste makes its way into the world's oceans each year, and the amount of the debris is likely to increase greatly over the next decade unless nations take strong measures to dispose of their trash responsibly, research suggests.

The report, which appeared in the journal *Science* on Thursday, is the most ambitious effort yet to estimate how much plastic debris ends up in the sea.

Jenna Jambeck, an assistant professor of environmental engineering at the University of Georgia and lead author of the study, said the amount of plastic that entered the oceans in the year measured, 2010, might be as little as 4.8 million metric tons or as much as 12.7 million.

The paper's middle figure of 8 million, she said, is the equivalent of "five plastic grocery bags filled with plastic for every foot of coastline in the world" – a visualization that, she said, "sort of blew my mind."

Read the whole story

Feds penalize Reno hospitals

By Bill Theobald, Reno Gazette-Journal

WASHINGTON — Six Reno-area hospitals are among 20 Nevada hospitals that will lose some federal funding this year because too many of their elderly Medicare patients were readmitted within 30 days of being discharged.

This is the third year for the penalty program, which was created as part of the Affordable Care Act with the intent of spurring hospitals to pay more attention to what happens to patients after they leave. That's leading some hospitals around the country to create more active plans for patients once they leave the hospital, such as requiring a follow up with a medical professional.

Meanwhile, hospitals can financially benefit from patients returning for more care. Roughly 2 million patients return a year, costing Medicare about \$26 billion. Of that total, officials estimate \$17 billion goes for readmissions that could have been avoided.

To help curb that practice, Medicare is fining a record number of hospitals this year — 2,610 — by withholding a percentage of their reimbursements for treating Medicare patients.

Read the whole story

Pedestrian killed in South Lake Tahoe

A man attempting to cross Ski Run Boulevard in South Lake Tahoe was killed Friday night.

The name of the 44-year-old victim is not being released pending notification of family.

A South Lake Tahoe police officer told *Lake Tahoe News* the Stateline resident was walking from between two parked cars near Larch Avenue into the traffic lane on Feb. 13 about 6:30pm when a vehicle hit him. The driver of the vehicle does not appear to have been intoxicated nor was foul play involved.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Truckee officers enforcing liquor laws

Most businesses in Truckee passed the test when it came to whether they would sell alcohol to a minor.

Truckee police officers on Feb. 12 conducted a minor decoy program with 17-year-olds.

“Our goal is to stop the accessibility of alcohol to minors and hopefully to greatly reduce underage drinking. It is not to trick establishments into serving minors who look close to 21,” Sgt. Bob Womack said in a statement.

One of the five restaurants sold alcohol to a minor. The server received a citation and the establishment was referred to ABC for administrative action against their alcoholic beverage license.

All stores asked for ID.

Another education program provided by Truckee PD is Licensee Education on Alcohol and Drugs program. Officers host trainings for bartenders, one-day licensees, and establishment owners about how to properly check IDs, serve alcohol, and deal with issues that often arise in licensed establishments.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

WyGant pleads not guilty to kiddie porn charges

Former South Lake Tahoe fire Capt. Mark WyGant pleaded not guilty Friday afternoon in U.S. District Court to charges related to child pornography.

The 44-year-old Chico resident faces six charges involving sexual exploitation and attempted sexual exploitation of minors.

Days after his Jan. 29 arrest he resigned from the department. A thumb drive with thousands of pictures of young girls as well as videos of them was discovered in a locker at the station where WyGant worked.

He remains in federal custody in Sacramento.

Drought nothing compared to what may be coming

By Darryl Fears, Washington Post

The long and severe drought in the U.S. Southwest pales in comparison with what's coming: a "megadrought" that will grip that region and the central plains later this century and probably stay there for decades, a new study says.

Thirty-five years from now, if the current pace of climate change continues unabated, those areas of the country will experience a weather shift that will linger for as long as three decades, according to the study, released Thursday.

Researchers from NASA and Cornell and Columbia universities warned of major water shortages and conditions that dry out vegetation, which can lead to monster wildfires in southern Arizona and parts of California.

"We really need to start thinking in longer-term horizons about how we're going to manage it," said Toby R. Ault, an assistant professor in the department of Earth and atmospheric sciences at Cornell, one of the co-authors. "This is a slow-moving natural hazard that humans are used to dealing with and used to managing."

Megadroughts are sustained periods of sparse precipitation and significant loss of soil moisture that span generations, about 10 times as long as a normal three-year drought.

Read the whole story

FBI director: U.S. at crossroads on race relations

By Eric Tucker, AP

WASHINGTON — The United States is at a crossroads on matters of race relations and law enforcement, presenting “hard truths” that its citizens and police must confront, FBI Director James Comey said Thursday.

Comey used a speech at Georgetown University to offer his most expansive take on a debate that has roiled in the country in recent months about police use of force and interactions with minority communities.



James Comey

The deaths at the hands of white police officers of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York, as well as the more recent slayings of two New York police officers, have raised difficult issues on both sides of the debate, he said.

One is that police officers who work in neighborhoods where most street crime is committed by young black men may hold unconscious biases and be tempted to take what he called a “mental shortcut” in dealing with suspicious situations.

“The two young black men on one side of the street look like

so many others the officer has locked up,” Comey said. “Two young white men on the other side of the street – even in the same clothes – do not. The officer does not make the same sinister association about the two white guys, whether that officer is white or black.”

But another truth is that minorities in poor neighborhoods too often inherit a “legacy of crime and prison,” a cycle he said must be broken to improve race relations with police.

Comey joined Attorney General Eric Holder in calling for better data about how often police use force. Such information is needed to make sound policy decisions, Comey said.

WyGant indicted on 6 federal counts

A federal grand jury on Feb. 12 indicted former South Lake Tahoe fire Capt. Mark WyGant on six counts regarding child pornography.

The 44-year-old faces charges of sexual exploitation and attempted sexual exploitation of minors.



Mark WyGant

WyGant remains in custody in Sacramento where he has been

since being arrested Jan. 29.

According to court documents, WyGant filmed a child on numerous occasions using a hidden cell telephone and hidden "spy cameras" that he had purchased for that purpose.

A thumb drive with 5,000 child pornography images and 50 videos of child porn was found in a locker at the fire station. It was turned over to the police, who figured out who they believed the owner was and then the FBI was brought in.

WyGant, who lived in Chico with his wife and stepchildren when not on duty in Tahoe, is scheduled to be arraigned Feb. 13 in federal court.

WyGant faces 30 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine per count if he is found guilty. Each count carries a minimum of 15 years in prison.

He resigned from the department Feb. 4.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report