

Smoking labels reflect a government that wants to control your life

By Wayne Hoffman

Your mother wants you to know that smoking is bad for you, and she's doing everything she can to make sure you either don't take up the habit or, if you are smoking, that you quit right away. By "your mother," of course I mean the government, which, increasingly comes in the form of the Obama administration and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. HHS announced that packs of cigarettes will now bear alternating images that include rotting teeth, human corpses and a man smoking through a hole in his neck. The government is requiring that its warning labels occupy the top half of the front and back of cigarette packs and 20 percent of print advertisements. Cigarettes that don't bear the labels can't be sold in the U.S. after Oct. 22, 2012.

"With these warnings, every person who picks up a pack of cigarettes is going to know exactly what risk they're taking," Sebelius said.

Thanks, Mom. Cigarette smokers already know the risks. And cigarettes are legal products, as are many other products that Mom would agree are definitely not good for us. I'm told that eating too much fast food is not a good choice, but, like cigarettes, are still legal products in this country. I'd bet Mother Sebelius wouldn't mind for us to see photos of fat corpses as we pull up to the drive thru at McDonalds.

That's a bit hyperbolic on my part. What's more likely is that the Obama administration will find new ways to take over advertisements and signal its approval or rejection of various food products. Maybe, in this administration's perfect world, all food products will be forced to contain prominent labels with red lights or green lights, corpses or butterflies, depending on the nutritional content of the food. And why not? If the government can tell cigarette makers what to put on their products, why would the government not be able to do the same with others?

Cigarette makers Reynolds and Lorillard are suing to overturn the government's new cigarette warning labels. The companies say the Sebelius' new requirements unconstitutionally "confiscate the top 50 percent of both sides of cigarette packaging and mandate shocking cover graphics." "Confiscate" accurately describes what the government has done. In pursuing its new requirements, the government is no longer trying to use warning labels to inform; it's trying to use cigarette makers to be the instruments of their own demise. To my way of thinking, it's as if the government has required that the cigarettes be sold in a vats containing live snakes. Sure, the product is perfectly legal, but it's perilous to buy and downright painful.

This is about a government that believes it can and should make health and lifestyle decisions for you; that believes we're too stupid to figure this stuff out on our own; that wants use government powers and mandates to alter behaviors to suit its desired outcomes. The Obama administration had no problem using the power of the government to tell you that you that you must buy health insurance. Now, they'll tell you that you mustn't buy cigarettes. There's no telling what's next. This is hardly about smoking. This is about freedom itself being under assault from an increasingly maternal, power-hungry, constitution-defying government in Washington, D.C.