AMA pushes for ban on tobacco items from stores with clinics

CHICAGO — The American Medical Association is at it again.

Just days removed from public comments filed by the Federal Trade Commission decrying the proliferation of such a move, physicians who gathered here last month for the AMA’s annual meeting, mustered the waters, backing a new public health policy that calls for a ban on the sale of tobacco products in retail outlets housing store-based health clinics.

AMA members voted to adopt the policy June 17. “It’s ridiculous for stores that house health clinics to sell tobacco products,” said AMA board member Dr. William Dolan.

The move may fan the flames in several states, such as Illinois, where some lawmakers seek to impose restrictions on the operation of retail-based clinics.

One year ago, a handful of smaller physicians’ organizations pushed a similarly unfriendly, anti-clinic agenda at the AMA’s 2007 annual meeting, pushing for a government investigation of retail clinics.

The news of the AMA’s new policy position sent waves throughout the convenient care industry.

SF mayor to drug stores: ‘The butt stops here’

SAN FRANCISCO — While many smokers regard the drug store as a destination for cigarette purchases, residents of one of California’s largest cities might soon need to look elsewhere to feed their nicotine fix.

Mayor Gavin Newsom proposed an amendment to the city’s health code in April that would ban tobacco sales at pharmacies and drug stores, but not grocery or big-box stores with pharmacies.

Similar bans are under consideration in New Hampshire, Illinois, Tennessee and New York.

Of course, drug store chains strongly oppose San Francisco’s proposed ban.

“We question the fairness of prohibiting a drug store with a pharmacy from selling tobacco products, while a grocery store or a big-box store with a pharmacy would not be prohibited from selling tobacco products,” said Cheryl Slavinsky, director of public relations for Rite Aid Stores.

Supporters of the ban, however, distinguish drug stores from other retailers because of their role as part of the healthcare industry. The San Francisco proposal states that by selling tobacco products, pharmacies “convey tacit approval” of tobacco use and send mixed messages to consumers.

Prescription for Change, a project of the California Medical Association Foundation to persuade pharmacies to stop selling tobacco, doesn’t mince words: “In this singular act of hypocrisy, pharmacies are legitimizing tobacco use to our kids.”

According to its Web site, more than 900 pharmacies in California no longer sell tobacco, though it did not specify whether they had stopped because of outside pressure, and representatives from the group could not be reached for comment.

West Coast drug store chain Longs Drug sells cigarettes with the opening of smoking cessation.

“One might conclude that a drug store might, in fact, be a better environment for someone to look for tobacco products because of the lack of contamination,” Longs spokesman Mark Holt said.

According to Nielsen, tobacco and accessories sales at drug stores were almost $2.6 billion in 2007.

Newsom’s proposal went to a board of supervisors committee June 5. As of press time, the committee had yet to schedule it for a vote.