

Banning menthol cigarettes for good will save Black lives. Don't let Big Tobacco get in the way.

By Leon McDougale, M.D., M.P.H.

For over 60 years — and counting — the tobacco industry has spent billions of advertising, marketing and lobbying dollars to exploit people within Black communities made vulnerable by racism, bias, geography, and socioeconomics. To sustain this effort a goal has been to persuade Black people that banning menthol cigarettes is against our best interest. As a result, 85% of Black smokers now use menthols, compared to less than 10% in the 1950s.

Today, the goal of ending menthol's deadly impact on Black health is finally within sight.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently proposed a historic ban on menthol cigarettes. This decision was issued in response to a lawsuit to compel FDA action filed by our organization, the National Medical Association (NMA), along with the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council, the American Medical Association and Action on Smoking and Health.

As the leader of an organization representing the collective voice of 50,000 Black physicians and their patients, I know Black doctors fully support President Biden and the FDA prioritizing the health of Black adults and kids across the nation. In fact, the National Medical Association passed a resolution in support of banning menthol cigarettes. This is especially significant as menthol was excluded from a past public health effort that prohibited other cigarette flavors. But despite this announcement, Black people are still not free from Big Tobacco's reach — not yet.

The proposed menthol ban is just that — a proposal. Until it is implemented, the tobacco industry can — and will — continue to target Black communities with its deadly products. Delaying action will have serious consequences, including more kids taking up menthol cigarettes and becoming addicted and more Black lives lost to smoking-related diseases.

To prevent further harm to the health of our communities, the FDA must act quickly to take menthol off the market, and the Black community must shut down attempts by Big Tobacco to mislead and divide us any further.

Enacting the menthol ban will save Black lives

For too long, NMA members have watched Black people suffer disproportionately at the hands of Big Tobacco. The cooling effect of menthol cigarettes makes it easier to start smoking and become addicted — and all the harder to quit.

Smoking-related diseases have become the leading cause of preventable death for Black people, accounting for 45,000 deaths in our community each year. Black Americans die at higher rates than other groups from tobacco-related diseases like cancer, heart disease and stroke — a stark reality we see in our practices every day.

The medical community has long known the dangers of menthol — and the FDA has too. A decade has passed since the FDA's scientific advisors first concluded that taking menthol cigarettes off the market is critical to improving public health, and the evidence has only grown since.

- In 2011, the FDA's Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee issued a comprehensive report that concluded, "removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit the public health in the United States."
- In 2013, the FDA issued its own scientific report, highlighting the increased risk menthol cigarettes pose to public health compared to non-menthol cigarettes.
- In 2018, then-FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said the agency would take action to ban menthol cigarettes, stating that menthol products "exacerbate troubling disparities in health related to race and socioeconomic status."
- In 2020, the Surgeon General's Report on smoking cessation found that Black Americans are less likely to quit smoking due to a higher use of menthol cigarettes.

After a decade of failing to follow through on these conclusions, the FDA must now act as quickly as possible to eliminate menthol cigarettes.

It's also a matter of racial equity

Fast action will also limit the number of untruths the tobacco industry can spread about banning menthol, the greatest one being about the potential for law enforcement abuse. It's an ironic fabrication, considering Big Tobacco's own history of targeting Black communities with its deadly products. As physicians committed to doing no harm, my colleagues and I were heartened to see the FDA's strong statement about how the proposed ban will be enforced — **on manufacturers and retailers, not consumers.**

Of course, the tobacco industry is well aware of this fact. And still, they continue to deceive in an effort to sell menthol products to Black people. Promoting the truth — that banning menthol will save Black lives — will be important for overcoming Big Tobacco's efforts to defeat the ban.

I don't want to continue seeing Black patients' health and wellness harmed by smoking. As the Biden Administration pushes forward on its commitment to advance racial and health equity, it must act quickly to protect Black Americans from further harm at the hands of the tobacco industry.

We have already waited an entire decade for action to eliminate menthol cigarettes and save Black lives. We can't afford to wait another one.

Leon McDougle, M.D., M.P.H. is the 121st President of the National Medical Association.