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Ban on Smoking In Montana City Cut Heart Attacks

By RON WINSLOW

CHICAGO—In a small but provocative study, researchers found that a smoking ban in bars, restaurants and other indoor businesses in Helena, Mont., was associated with a nearly 60% drop in hospital admissions for heart attacks in the six months that it was in effect.

Moreover, after the smoking ban was overturned by a local court decision last December, the heart-attack rate appears to have returned to preban levels, said Richard P. Sargent, a family-practice doctor in Helena who led the study.

The findings, which Dr. Sargent presented at the annual scientific meeting of the American College of Cardiology here, are certain to energize advocates of local smoke-free ordinances and laws that are beginning to spread around the U.S. Just this week, most bars and restaurants in New York City went smoke-free. New York state, Boston and Dallas are among other locales where such laws are pending.

Whether such a significant drop would be sustained over time or might occur in larger, more-urban communities would require further study. But "this is a strong piece of evidence of the need to avoid the dangers of secondhand smoke," said Sidney Smith, a cardiolo-

gist at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former chief science officer at the American Heart Association.

Dr. Sargent, who is also a quality-assurance officer at St. Peter's Hospital in Helena, and his colleagues undertook the study after noticing a significant numerical drop the numbers of heart-attack admissions during the first few months after the city's ordinance went into effect last June.

A more thorough analysis, looking at four years of historical data as well as comparing admissions from city ZIP codes affected by the smoke-free ordinance with those in outlying communities unaffected by the law, confirmed the observation, he said. From June through November, the number of heart-attack admissions per month from Helena ZIP codes fell to about three from seven, the monthly average during the previous four years. The rate from outlying towns was unchanged.

Despite the small numbers, the statistical analysis, done at the University of California at San Francisco, indicate the results meet high tests of validity. Dr. Sargent's observation that the monthly rate has returned to about seven since the ordinance was suspended wasn't part of the analysis. He said it will require at least another month of data to get a statistically valid picture of the current rate.

While public-health bodies consider secondhand smoke a health hazard, the notion is controversial. But studies have shown among other things that even relatively short exposure can cause elements of the blood called platelets to become sticky, promoting clots, and that cells that line the interior of blood-vessel walls are vulnerable to being damaged or dying as a result of secondhand smoke, potentially promoting heart attacks.