When “More doctors smoked Camels”:
Cigarette advertising in the Journal

Even well into the twentieth century, cigarette smoking hadn’t caught on among most men—and definitely not among women. But through mass media advertising and overseas tobacco funds for the boys at war, cigarettes became firmly entrenched by the 1920s. The tobacco companies were the first to offer women equal rights, of a sort, with slogans such as “I’m a Lucky girl,” “Blow some my way,” and “Do you inhale? Everybody’s doing it!” Readers of the Sunday funnies were told by ball-players like Lou Gherig and Joe DiMaggio, “They don’t get your wind ... So mild, athletes smoke as many as they please!” To respond to those nagging, fuddy-duddy health doubters, various salutary claims and endorsements by doctors of certain brands began to appear. By the 1930s cigarette advertisements had made their way into medical journals, including the New York State Journal of Medicine. The following article was written by Alan Blum, MD, Editor, with extensive research assistance by Jessica Rosenberg, a medical student at New York University.

In 1927 the American Tobacco Company began a new advertising campaign for the nation’s leading cigarette brand, Lucky Strike, by claiming that 11,105 physicians endorsed Luckies as “less irritating to sensitive or tender throats than any other cigarettes.” The reaction in the New York State Journal of Medicine was a swift denunciation from both a moral and a scientific standpoint by the Society’s legal counsel, Lloyd Paul Stryker:

In this present era of advertising and publicity ... we are accustomed to see portrayals of dramatic critics, actors, and others smoking some particular brand of cigarette and certifying that there is nothing like it. The endorsers, we understand, are not infrequently remunerated.

The propriety of this course on the part of those who furnish their endorsements, where such endorsers are members of the laity, is a matter falling within their liberty of choice, and is properly governed by their own sense of fitness of things. When, however, non-therapeutic agents such as cigarettes are advertised as having the recommendation of the medical profession, the public is thereby led to believe that some real scientific inquiry has been instituted, and that the endorsement is the result of painstaking and accurate inquiry as to the merits of the product.

Despite the frequent attacks upon the medical profession, we believe that the people of this country, take them as a whole, have a regard and wholesome faith in their physicians. All that tends to the building up and strengthening of this faith redounds to the benefit of the medical profession and of its individual members, and that which in any wise tends to shake this faith and confidence works a detriment not only to the profession as a whole but to each individual practitioner. All that tends to strengthen the faith of the people in the belief that medical opinions are founded upon a sound scientific basis, should be fostered by the profession.

Although Stryker could find no canon of the principles of professional conduct of MSSNY that such endorsements definitely violated, he questioned whether or not such involvement by physicians, albeit in this instance most likely unintentional, tends “to advance the science and honor of medicine and to guard and uphold its high standard of honor.”

A few months later the Journal noted the praise by California and Western Medicine (among other journals) for Stryker’s commentary:

It is regrettable that any physicians should have thoughtlessly lent their support to this advertising scheme. The profession that has studiously worked to protect the people from fraudulent claims of drug advertisers should be more alert and discerning.

In the same issue, the Journal published new Advertising Standards that declared, “The Journal will continue to select, to require proof, to reflect. And its advertising columns will prove increasingly valuable to the readers as a guide to reliability of firm and product.” A subsequent editorial announced that advertisements would be edited as if they were scientific articles or news items, to “guard against extravagant statements.”

In spite of these assurances, and in the absence of an announcement of a modification of these standards, the Journal published its first cigarette advertisement in 1933. For more than 20 years it was to accept more than 600 pages of cigarette advertisements from the six major tobacco companies. Although it is difficult to understand how the Journal permitted cigarette advertising, there is no mystery whatsoever as to why tobacco companies sought out medical journals: in the words of an Irish proverb, “Truth may be good, but juxtaposition is better.” The tobacco companies were buying complacency.

FULL-BODIED

The first tobacco company to purchase advertising space in the Journal was Liggett & Myers. From October 1, 1933, to July 1, 1938, an advertisement for Chesterfield cigarettes appeared in alternating issues, usually on the premium-space back cover. Although some advertisements suggested Chesterfields were healthful (“Just as pure as the water you drink ... and practically untouched by human hands”—Dec 1, 1933), most were composed of a romantic young couple, a double-entendre catchphrase (“They satisfy!”), and the distinctive Chesterfield logo. The following dialogue was printed below a scene of two lovers snuggled in a one-horse sleigh (Aug 1, 1934):

Woman: “I thank you—I thank you ever so much—but I couldn’t even think about smoking a cigarette.”

Man: “Well, I understand, but they are so mild and taste so good that I thought you might not mind trying one while we are riding along out there.”

Perhaps because Lucky Strikes were America’s top-selling and most widely advertised brand by the 1930s, the American Tobacco Company may not have wanted to court additional undue medical skepticism concerning its various health-oriented slogans, including, “No throat irritation. No cough.” Only one advertisement for Lucky Strike appears to have been published in the Journal. Headlined, “A Quarter Century of Research Relating to a Light Smoke,” the advertisement discussed America’s long-standing ef-
YOU MAY have questions... on the physiological effects of smoking... which we can answer. Please feel free to ask us.

Our research files contain exhaustive data from authoritative sources—from which we will be glad to quote whatever may bear upon your question.

If you have not already read the studies on the relative effects of cigarette smoke, may we suggest that you use the request blank below? And also that you try Philip Morris Cigarettes yourself.
nose are far more efficient than the eye for detecting irritating smoke. Indeed, that is precisely part of the job of these nerve ends. When cigarettes made with diethylene glycol (ie, Philip Morris) were so tested by the writer and several others (smoke quickly drawn up through the nose), they were found, unfortunately, to be quite as irritating as other cigarettes.

Doubtless as the result of this article, Philip Morris issued a retraction of sorts which was published in the issue of Jan 15, 1943:

A DISCLAIMER:

Philip Morris & Company do not claim that Philip Morris cigarettes cure irritation. But they do say that an ingredient — glycerine — a source of irritation in other cigarettes, is not used in the manufacture of Philip Morris cigarettes.

This did not stop Philip Morris from developing advertising themes throughout the 1940s such as “Why many leading nose and throat specialists suggest . . . change to Philip Morris” (1948–1949) or from boasting about the integrity of its advertising:

INTERESTED IN CIGARETTE ADVERTISING?

Comments, words, clever advertising slogans do sell plenty of products. But obviously they do not change the product itself. That Philip Morris are less irritating to the nose and throat is not merely a claim. It is the result of a manufacturing difference proved advantageous over and over again (Nov 1, 1945).

Although little Johnny the bellhop appeared each evening on such popular radio programs as “The Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show,” his smiling face never appeared in the Journal. Nonetheless, Johnny was enlisted in printed advertisements in the mass media to promote the theme of Philip Morris “definitely less irritating” properties. Among the slogans he was shown calling out were, “Don’t let inhaling worry you (if you switch to Philip Morris)” and “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Philip Morris never explained why Johnny’s growth was stunted.

SLOW BURN

R.J. Reynolds first advertised in the Journal in 1941. Advertisements for Camels appeared in every issue for the rest of the decade, and in every other issue from 1950 to 1953. The early advertisements claimed that Camels, “the slower burning cigarette,” produced less nicotine in the smoke. Photographs of men in white laboratory coats peering into test tubes lent a scientific touch. Like Philip Morris, R.J. Reynolds suggested switching brands as the alternative to quitting smoking. Rather than emphasize the irritation issue, R.J. Reynolds chose to play on the use of cigarettes to relieve “the strain of current life,” as illustrated in this advertisement from Nov 1, 1942:
In these unsettled times, individuals may tend to display baffling, sub-clinical symptoms. The relationship of these symptoms to smoking and nicotine absorption can be an interesting subject for exploration.

However, the success of the physician’s program is dependent upon the patient’s full cooperation.

Your recommendation of Camel cigarettes can be an aid in this direction. . .

Given adequate support by patients, the physician may find case histories more reliable. In addition, the segregation of such data may facilitate valuable group analyses.

Although American Tobacco was first to exploit a patriotic wartime theme (“Lucky Strike Green has gone to war”), R.J. Reynolds quickly followed suit by portraying Camels “as the favorite of the armed forces” (Feb 1, 1943) and appealing to physicians to send a carton to their “friends with the fighting forces.” Military physicians became “heroes in white” (Mar 1, 1945), whose only rare comfort was a trusty Camel.

Following a series of postwar advertisements praising America’s fighting, smoking physicians, R.J. Reynolds introduced a campaign, based on a survey of 113,597 physicians, that claimed, “More Doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette.” The first advertisement in the series (Jan 1, 1946) included a reprint of a “Dear Doctor” letter from the Camel Medical Relations Division, One Pershing Square, New York, NY, which praised its own survey. The “More Doctors smoke Camels” theme could be heard on most prime-time radio programs, including such children’s favorites as “Abbott and Costello.” Advertisements nearly identical to those that appeared in medical journals also ran each week in the three most popular magazines of the era, LIFE, TIME, and The Saturday Evening Post, thus assuring maximum media saturation.

But R.J. Reynolds managed to top this effort in its direct-to-physician advertising with a campaign for Camels cigarettes that posthumously honored great medical discoverers: Thomas Addison, John William Ballantyne, Sir Charles Bell, John Hughes Bennett, Claude Bernard, Richard Bright, Charles Edoard Brown-Séquard, Paul Ehrlich, Carlos Finlay, Camillo Golgi, William Whitney Gull, Marshall Hall, Herman von Helmholtz, F.G. Jacob Henle, Robert Koch, Joseph Lister, Theobold Smith, William Stokes, Rudolph Virchow, and William Henry Welch. Advertisements in nearly every issue of the Journal in 1947 and 1948 praised the perseverance of these men, beneath the headlined slogan, “Experience is the Best Teacher.” The advertisements concluded with the line, “Experience is the best teacher in cigarettes too!” and cited statistical proof that Camels were the “choice of experience.”

HOUSECALLS

Another way tobacco companies played up to physicians was to provide them with free cartons of cigarettes. This was done either by mail (as part of market research surveys) or by an attractive “detail woman” (who would see to it that a plentiful supply of cigarettes was available in the patients’ waiting area) or by exhibits at medical meetings. In 1940 Philip Morris took out space in the Journal for an “invitation” to physicians to drop by the cigarette company’s booth at the annual convention of the Medical Society of the State of New York. Beginning in 1942, R.J. Reynolds invited physicians to visit the Camel cigarette exhibit at the convention of the American Medical Association (AMA). This...
advertisement was not unlike a circus poster:

See for the first time the dramatic visualization of nicotine absorption from cigarette smoke in the human respiratory tract.

See the giant photo-murals of Camel laboratory research experiments....

In 1949 Reynolds concocted the "30-day test," whereby unnamed but "noted throat specialists" were used to back up the claim, "Not one case of throat irritation due to smoking Camels!" Philip Morris countered with the "nose test," which it urged physicians to try (Mar 1, 1950). In before-and-after pictures, a young woman was shown exhaling smoke through her nostrils—smiling in the photograph labeled "Philip Morris" and grimacing with her "present brand." The advertisement claimed the doctor-smoker would also "see at once Philip Morris are less irritating."

By 1950, Philip Morris had found a new lure: "Make our doctors' lounge your club," invited one advertisement (June 1, 1950). Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, trying to attract frightened consumers to filter cigarettes, also worked the medical market. One of its advertisements thanked "the 64,985 doctors who visited Viceroy exhibits at medical conventions" (June 1, 1954).

OUT WITH THE BAD AIR . . .

Even though the cigarette companies have never publicly acknowledged any lasting harm attributed to their product, they have always attempted to portray various brands as safer and healthier than others. No aspect is more central to the hoax of safer smoking than is the filter. The first advertisement carried by the Journal for a filter cigarette was for Viceroy (July 15, 1939): "AT LAST . . . a cigarette that filters each puff clean!" ("No more tobacco in mouth or teeth. . . A note on your office stationery will bring two packages with our compliments.")

By 1953, following publication of several major studies that left little doubt about cigarette smoking's role as the primary factor in the growing epidemic of lung cancer among men, nearly all the remaining cigarette advertisements in the Journal and other medical publications were for filter cigarettes. The drop-off in cigarette advertising in the Journal did not merely come about because the companies' ability to deceive or confuse physicians had run its course. Rather, television had become the predominant medium, and the bulk of advertising budgets was shifted into the sponsorship of the most popular programs.

Philip Morris ran its last advertisement in the Journal on August 1, 1953; Reynolds exited at the end of 1953, but not before touting a new slogan, "Progress through research." Meanwhile, Lorillard had launched nationally televised "scientific" demonstrations to show the efficacy and implicit medical benefits of its Micronite filter. This campaign was backed up by a heavy dose of advertising in medical publications.

Although the advertisements never disclosed the composition of "Micronite," there is evidence that the material that Lorillard touted as "so safe, so effective it has been selected to help filter the air in hospital operating rooms" (May 15, 1954) and "to purify the air in atomic energy plants of microscopic impurities" (Feb 15, 1954) was asbestos. A case report from the Thoracic Services of Boston University Medical School, "Asbestos following brief exposure in cigarette filter manufacture," described a 47-year old man who had been exposed to asbestos dust for a period
of nine months in 1953 while working in a factory that manufactured filters containing asbestos. The patient made cigarette filters that consisted of a mixture of Cape Blue asbestos and acetate. According to the second author and a second source, the filters were made for Lorillard, although it is possible that these particular filters were in some way different from the Kent Micronite filters.

Brown & Williamson again drew Journal readers' attention to the alleged lower tar and nicotine content of Viceroy, "as proved by testing methods acceptable to the United States Government." (Nov 15, 1953). The last cigarette advertisement appeared in the New York State Journal of Medicine on January 15, 1955, paid for by Lorillard to proclaim, "Old Gold—the first famous name brand to give you a filter." This from a company that had advertised Old Gold with the slogan "not a cough in a car-load" in the 1930s and 1940s and had ridiculed the early medical reports pointing to the lethal side-effects of smoking with the slogan (also appearing in medical journals), "For a treat instead of a treatment."

Little if any criticism of the policy of accepting cigarette advertising appears to have been published in the Journal during the 20 years these advertisements ran. The same is true of JAMA, which published cigarette advertising between 1933 and 1953. But in 1954 a campaign for Kent, which implied an endorsement by the medical profession (merely because the manufacturer had also taken out advertisements in medical journals), incurred the wrath of an editorialist at JAMA, who denounced the advertising as "an outrageous example of commercial exploitation of the American medical profession and a reprehensible instance of hucksterism." In a subsequent letter to JAMA Irving S. Wright, M.D., added that not only were the Kent advertisements misleading (which implied Kents were the choice for persons with vascular disease) but also especially dangerous. Wright described a patient with quiescent thromboangiitis obliterans who suffered a recurrence after having read a Kent advertisement that led him to resume smoking.

Thirty years after cigarette advertisements disappeared from peer-reviewed medical journals, it seems inconceivable that they ever could have been accepted in the first place. Yet many of the throw-away medical magazines continued to accept cigarette advertising throughout the 1960s and 1970s. At least one medical magazine, Physician East, which lists six physicians on its masthead and is published in Boston, has been running cigarette advertising in 1983. Others, including JAMA, carry advertising for CNA Insurance Company, a division of Loews.

**Comment**

Many goods and services offered in the Journal in the past half-century have stood the test of time, but a policy of accepting advertisements for cigarettes is a sad saga for this and all other medical publications that have carried them—and for the entire advertising and publishing fields. It may be too late to publish corrective advertising for promotions that ceased 30 years ago, but even in retrospect the credibility of the publication is harmed. The knowledge and common sense about cigarette smoking were there—but so were the mass media to undermine knowledge and cultivate mass denial. One clear lesson is that physicians are not immune to propaganda. But the point of this article (and this entire issue) is that the situation in regard to the promotion of smoking is even more pernicious today. The old advertisements in the Journal may seem ridiculous in their images and claims, and we can rationalize that we no longer acquiesce in the sale of cigarettes in a medical context. But do we? Whenever we flip past the cigarette ad on the sports page of The Times or ignore the one on the billboard downtown or on the bus, subway, or taxi that drops the patient off at our offices, we as leaders in society are doing precisely what the cigarette advertisers want us to do: not become angry, but rather to become resigned or complacent. Advertising for a product is not solely designed to sell to potential or current users, but also to assure the complacency or tolerance of non-users.

A common attitude among physicians today is that smoking will gradually die out in the next few years and that the cigarette companies will leave cigarettes to diversify into other kinds of businesses. Unfortunately, this is not on the agenda for a single cigarette company, least of all those which are aiming at developing nations.

It is too simple—and naive—a matter to call for a total ban on cigarette advertising, as so many other medical editorialists have done. Even granting an unforeseen awakening by Congress and local governments to the need for such an action, to judge from the events in countries where there have been such prohibitions, the tobacco industry is adept at incorporating its brand names, images, and packaging colors into other media. At LaGuardia and Kennedy international airports, for instance, the red rectangular symbol with the white triangular cut into it does not require a printed message for it to be instantaneously recognized that Marlboro cigarettes are being advertised. The clear solution is to remove all economic incentives for the cigarette companies and their subsidiaries, and the first step may well be a physician-led selective economic boycott. At the rate these conglomerates are growing, if the medical profession misses out on this opportunity, it may one day find itself working for health maintenance organizations operated by Loews, hospitals run by Philip Morris, trauma centers controlled by R.J. Reynolds, outpatient clinics established by Brown & Williamson, professional provider organizations set up by American Brands, and pharmaceutical manufacturers owned by Liggett. To judge from the increasing number of medical research councils, institutes, and science symposia underwritten by tobacco companies, and the medical schools and business schools accepting endowment money from them, this possibility may not be that far-fetched.

**References**

7. Personal communication, EA Gaensler, CB Carrington.