The Surgeon General's report on smoking and health 40 years later: still wandering in the desert

January 11, 2004, marks the 40th anniversary of the US Surgeon General's report on smoking and health. The unequivocal conclusion that cigarette cause lung cancer and other diseases was to have ended a debate that had raged for decades (figure 1). 1

The report's condemnation of smoking was the lead story on television and radio news. Newsletters reported the story in banner headlines as big as those for V-E Day or the H-bomb (figure 2). Until that moment, the tobacco industry had always had the last word through its ability to flood the mass media with advertising messages that glamorised the cigarette and assured consumer doubts about the harm smoking might cause.

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US$18 million over 14 years to the American Medical Association (the only major health organisation to withhold its endorsement of the report) in a research programme to "identify and remove" any possible harmful components of cigarette smoke. 2

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Figure 1: Cover of Surgeon General's report on smoking and health

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COMMENTARY

40 years after the Surgeon General's report, we are still wandering in the desert. We are as far away from the promised land as we were when we began the journey. Progress has come about so slowly because of a combination of political clout and lucrative payoffs to the very forces that should have been in the vanguard to end the tobacco pandemic. Congress (Democratic and Republican representatives alike), the mass media, medical organisations, and academia have all been chronic recipients of largesse from the tobacco industry, and have not been prepared to bite the hand that fed them.

Meanwhile the health community has carried on, bouncing from one failed multi-million dollar public-relations crusade after another (eg, Project ASSIST, Smokeless throat, The Great American Smoke-out, Kick Butts Day, A Smoke-Free Generation by the Year 2000, Healthy People 2000), only to settle each time for voluntary agreements crafted by the tobacco industry.

The US public-health community have also put its faith in three mirages: safer cigarettes that promise to reduce death and disease, policy coalitions that propose prohibitionist legislation, and state attorneys-general who worship the golden calf of cease settlements.

Shirking its responsibility to dissuade people from smoking, the US National Cancer Institute devoted its entire budget on tobacco between 1967 and 1981 to the tobacco pandemic. Congress has been a safer cigarette. The same quest continues today, under the guise of "tobacco reduction", a concept supported by cigarette and snuff manufacturers alike by means of generous research grants to several US medical schools. At the same time, medical school curricula remain as devoid as ever of comprehensive interdisciplinary instruction and assignments to address and tackle tobacco problems.

The mirage of an advertising ban has revealed itself time and time again. Such static-minded regulation seems to stimulate the creative juices of cigarette marketers, who have continuously redefined the very nature of advertising and promotion. Most embarrassing of all, it is now the tobacco industry that spends more money than all government or health organisations together on television advertisements urging teenagers not to smoke and informing viewers that there is no safe cigarette. The main response by the Coalition for Tobacco-Free Kids, the Washington, DC, lobbyists, is to step up its call for the regulation of nicotine and tobacco products by the US Food and Drug Administration.

Building of coalitions, a concept promulgated since the 1960s, has proven to be another mirage. In coalitions, health and civic organisations join hands, the more the merrier, only to be held back by the weakest links. The bulk of their effort goes to raising funds.

Indeed, the flow of Big Money from Big Tobacco—hundreds of millions of dollars handed over to the states under the Master Settlement Agreement negotiated by the tobacco companies with the attorneys-general—has fooled anti-smoking groups into thinking they would at long last buy the best minds in the advertising game for major campaigns in the mass media. It did not happen. The sad state of affairs is reflected in the recent paid advertisements by the American Legacy Foundation, established with over a billion dollars in settlement money to fund the overdue national campaign against smoking, which consisted of full pages in the Wall Street Journal pleading for donations.

Still missing is a Moses to lead us out of the desert. The one hope is that leadership will emerge from the grassroots, which, after all, was the wellspring of the success of the anti-smoking movement: legislation on clean indoor air. Independent activists with scant resources, such as John Barzash's Action on Smoking and Health, GASIP (Group Against Smoking Poisoning), and ANR (Americans for Non-smokers' Rights), led the way, while the American Cancer Society and other large organisations followed.

We challenge the anti-tobacco movement to rediscover its origins by fanning the flames of grassroots activism, and getting back to the trenches by building broad public constituencies instead of elitist academic oligarchies. Would that today's generation of tobacco controllers might end the self-interested preoccupation with money and grantsmanship, downplay the obsession with tobacco industry documents and injustice collecting, and face up to the loophole-laden reality of prohibitionist regulatory schemes.

Rather than training more nicotine addictionologists and epidemiologists, we need to cultivate more creative strategists and steadfast troublemakers. In other words, we need less research and more action. Above all, we need less reliance on Big Government, which has failed the test of courage time and time again.

Our hope is that new and imaginative leadership will arise to establish and stick to realistic goals and priorities, to divide up the responsibilities for achieving them, and to be held accountable for their success or failure. Without such maturation, the anti-smoking movement will continue to point madly to the Surgeon General's report while still wandering in the desert.

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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