

TESTIMONY OF DR. ALAN BLUM BEFORE THE HOUSTON CITY COUNCIL,
MARCH 14, 1990, CONCERNING THE TARGETING BY TOBACCO
COMPANIES OF WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND MINORITY GROUPS IN HOUSTON

Good morning, members of Council. My name is Alan Blum. I am a family doctor in Houston, the father of three children in the Houston Independent School District, and the founder and chairman since 1977 of DOC--or Doctors Ought to Care--a national organization of more than 5000 health professionals that works with young people to counteract the promotion of unhealthy products.

Each year for the past three years I have brought a group of 12 young doctors-in-training to City Hall to observe a meeting of this Council as a way of introducing them to a system that encourages citizen involvement in their community.

At this Council and throughout our city, we have heard much about the importance of supporting a war on illegal drugs--the Houston Crackdown on drugs. Meanwhile, there is another, far more successful war being waged. It is a war on women, minority groups, and children, and it is being waged by the pushers of tobacco and alcohol.

For every death in this city due to cocaine or other illegal drugs, there are approximately 100 deaths caused by tobacco products. This means that more than 5000 Houstonians will die prematurely in 1990 after suffering horribly from emphysema, heart disease, or cancer of the lung, brain, larynx, and other organs--all due to tobacco use. In order to replace these thousands of lost customers, tobacco companies must recruit at least 30 Houston children each day.

The cynical campaign for Dakota cigarettes is just the latest way they are going about it. Young Houston women in their prime child-bearing years have been selected by a New York cigarette company--RJR-Nabisco--as the target for...what? A new package design, a new example of consumer fraud, a new seed of lung cancer. The same company created Uptown for young Blacks, Camel for the boys, and now Dakota for girls.

This Council needs to take a stand on Dakota, such as by asking the state attorney general to hold a hearing on the deceptive advertising practices and perhaps criminal behavior--aiming as they do at children, such as with cartoon characters offering free cigarettes--on the part of the tobacco companies involved. Or the Council could just go along and adopt Dakota as Houston's official cigarette, with the slogan "Dakota, DaCancer, DaCoffin."

An equally outrageous but hardly discussed example of advertised drug-pushing is the Virginia Slims Cigarettes Tennis Tournament, which will wheeze into our city in two weeks, featuring a 13-year old girl and other teenage players, as well as children ages 9, 10, and 11 who are being solicited to serve as ballboys and ballgirls wearing their Virginia Slims cigarettes t-shirts. We would most certainly be outraged if this were the Medellin Cartel Slims Tennis Tournament, yet this is only one of at least a dozen tobacco-sponsored sporting events in Houston over the past year in which children are admitted either free or at a discount and where child-sized clothing with cigarette brand logos is sold.

I hope this Council will go squarely on the record as condemning tobacco company sponsorship of sports in Houston.

Perhaps the most despicable tactic of tobacco companies and their billboard allies in Houston is the targeting of young Black and Hispanic men and women. There are five times as many tobacco and alcohol advertisements in predominantly Black or Hispanic neighborhoods--a tragic irony considering the dramatically higher death rate from lung cancer in these groups.

Please put yourself in the mind of a child raised in these neighborhoods looking up every day to the role models in the cigarette ads. For every "Just Say No to Drugs" sign, there are dozens of billboards pushing the legal drugs of tobacco and alcohol.

Freedom of speech does not give anyone the right to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater or, in my opinion, to yell "Smoke!" in a rapidly growing bankrupt health care system. I urge the Council to take the national lead on this issue among cities by commending the Secretary of Health Dr. Louis Sullivan for his condemnation of tobacco industry marketing practices to women, children, and minority groups. I hope you will officially invite him and the new Surgeon General Dr. Novello to visit Houston, and I hope we can all begin to "just say no" to tobacco pushers and their allies.

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