



ALTON OCHSNER, MD

Alton Ochsner, MD, 1896–1981

He cleared the air

"In the early '50s, Alton Ochsner was coming to give a lecture to our medical school class at the University of Michigan. We thought we'd play the wise guys. So as soon as he was introduced, we all lit up cigarettes. But Ochsner never batted an eyelash. On the contrary, within only a few minutes of listening to him and seeing his vivid slides and x-rays of patients who died from lung cancer, not a soul was still smoking. And I doubt very many of us ever smoked again after that. I know I didn't."

The story was told by a physician who had just heard Dr. Ochsner, at age 84, deliver one of the major scientific addresses at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Family Physicians in 1980; the listener had found his presentation on the same topic as dynamic and compelling as it was 30 years before. Even if Ochsner, who died on September 24, 1981, had not been among the first physicians, in 1936, to make the connection between smoking and lung cancer, he would still be remembered as one of the foremost thoracic surgeons and medical teachers in history. Named chairman of surgery at Tulane University at the age of 30, he went on to found a leading medical center, the Ochsner Foundation Hospital (named after him as a sign of admiration by his physician-co-founders).

Ochsner's persistent belief that cigarette smoking was the principal cause of the growing epidemic of lung cancer—a theory he publicized throughout the 1940s in the face of ridicule and vituperative attacks even from within the medical profession—symbolized his energetic drive to improve public health. In 1919, lung cancer was such a rare disease that Ochsner's entire junior medical school class at Washington University's Barnes Hospital was asked to witness the autopsy of a man who had died from it. The professor, George Dock, MD, believed no one in the class would ever again see another such case. Seventeen years later, after having been a surgeon for more than a decade, Ochsner did see his next case of lung cancer—nine cases, in fact, in a period of just six months. Because all the patients were men who had taken up the newly mass-advertised practice of smoking while serving as soldiers in World War I, he had the temerity to suggest that cigarette smoking was responsible.

By 1952 he and his colleagues Paul DeCamp, MD, Michael DeBakey, MD, and C. J. Ray, MD, could write in *JAMA* (148:691–697), "There is a distinct parallelism

between the sale of cigarettes and the incidence of bronchogenic carcinoma." They accurately predicted that the death rate from lung cancer would escalate as long as smoking continued to exist and that lung cancer would be the leading cause of death from cancer. So controversial was Ochsner that prior to an appearance on "Meet the Press" in the mid-1950's, he was told he would not be permitted to mention on the air the possible causal relationship between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ochsner pointed out that as tragic as is the fatality rate from lung cancer due to smoking, it pales in comparison to cigarette-related deaths from heart attack and emphysema. After the widespread publicity accorded the breast cancer experiences of the First Lady, Mrs. Betty Ford, and the wife of the Vice-president, Mrs. Happy Rockefeller, Ochsner castigated the mass media for ignoring lung cancer—a more preventable problem and soon to become a greater cause of death among women. He also criticized insurance companies, having tried for years to get them to give preferential rates to nonsmokers. "The companies' own statistics show that heavy smokers live about 8½ years less," he said, "but premiums appear to be set according to death rates for smokers. Company profits are thus boosted at the expense of nonsmokers who do not only pay extra but live longer." He surmised that insurance companies have tobacco stock in their portfolios.

Ochsner was among the first to debunk the government's \$40 million research effort to develop a "safe cigarette." Whenever he was asked if filter cigarettes had any value, he would reply, "Yes, for the tobacco industry. They help sell more cigarettes."

Obituaries of Ochsner depicted him as a foe of smoking and a nemesis of the tobacco industry. It would be more accurate to describe him as a forceful advocate for good health. Although a surgeon, he preferred to speak out about measures that could prevent a need for the knife. "Even though relief of symptoms and prolongation of life can be obtained by surgery and other therapeutic measures," he wrote in *JAMA* in 1966 (196:852), "only through prevention, mainly abstinence from smoking, can one hope to attain better results in the treatment of lung cancer."

There is little on the horizon to challenge that statement.

ALAN BLUM, MD
Editor