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 AMA Evolving into Leader on Anti-Tobacco Fight
 By LAURAN NEERGAARD
 Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) -- After all but avoiding the battle for years, the American Medical Association is taking the lead in pushing for federal regulation of tobacco as an addictive drug. The rhetoric has risen -- comparing the industry to "the Medellin drug cartel" -- as President Clinton nears a decision.

Clinton, focusing on smoking among young people, will announce his stance as early as Wednesday in a speech in Charlotte, N.C., the heart of tobacco country.

The AMA finally declared all-out war on tobacco when it published once-secret documents indicating industry schemes to hide tobacco's dangers. The new president of the doctors organization, Dr. Lonnie Bristow, fairly bristles at the industry effort.

"It was the most despicable action by an industry I had ever heard, something you would expect from the Medellin drug cartel," he says.

Such vehemence is rare for the nation's largest doctors group, whose California branch even today is accused of thwarting anti-smoking efforts.

Bristow personally urged Clinton to allow the FDA to crack down on teen-age tobacco use, and the AMA recently put the force of its 296,000 members behind intensive lobbying of Congress.

"There's been an institutional shift in how they deal with this," said Stanton Glantz, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. "While they have a terrible historical record ... they're becoming a 500-pound gorilla."

The AMA accepted millions of dollars from tobacco makers in the 1960s to study smoking's health risks, a move the industry used for years to assert that the question of whether tobacco causes cancer was unresolved.

In the past year, the AMA came under fire for supporting legal changes to exempt tobacco from lawsuits -- a position it recanted in June -- and for giving higher campaign contributions to lawmakers who oppose tobacco control than to anti-smoking members of Congress.

And anti-smoking activists accuse its largest branch of helping gut a campaign credited with tripling California's smoking decline. The California Medical Association supports diverting \$102 million earmarked by law for tobacco control and transferring it to programs that pay doctors to treat the uninsured. Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights just won a court order freezing the funds.

CMA chief Dr. Jack Lewin said a budget crisis prompted the tough decision. "This divisiveness plays into the hands of the tobacco industry," he says, but the American Lung Association says the doctors are jeopardizing one of the nation's most successful anti-tobacco programs.

Nationally, Bristow says the AMA has fought tobacco for several years, protesting the Joe Camel cigarette ads and signing petitions for FDA regulation.

And the industry calls the AMA a formidable foe. "The anti-smokers like to position themselves as the Davids in this battle," said Brennan Dawson of the Tobacco Institute. "I think the AMA has been very active."

But, "they have not been out in the forefront," said Scott Ballin of the Coalition on Smoking or Health. "It was not as high a priority as health care reform and medical malpractice ... the pocketbook issues for doctors."

The turning point, Bristow indicated, came last month when the AMA published in its journal documents detailing Brown & Williamson Tobacco Co.'s elaborate steps to conceal evidence suggesting nicotine is addictive. The company denies wrongdoing and fought publication of the records.

Although many of the documents were made public in Congress and newspapers last year, the AMA had largely ignored them until Glantz gave them a scientific review. Suddenly, the doctors got angry, declaring: "The U.S. public has been duped by the tobacco industry."

Bristow moved quickly. A week later, he was on the phone with Clinton and meeting with anti-smoking activists to lobby Congress.

Ballin expects Bristow, who became AMA president in June, to greatly expand the group's anti-tobacco efforts.

Bristow plans to teach average Americans how to fight teen-age tobacco use themselves. When a TV viewer spots a cigarette billboard during a baseball game, that's illegal, report it to the Justice Department, he advises. Test local stores to see if they sell tobacco to minors.

"If your 14-year-old daughter can buy that pack of cigarettes, call the police," Bristow advises. "There's a lot we can do as individual citizens."

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