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AMA spent decades aiding tobacco firms, local doctor claims

By JOHN MAKEIG

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The American Medical Association spent decades helping major U.S. tobacco manufacturers downplay the health dangers of cigarettes, a leading anti-smoking physician from Houston claims.

"The medical community worked arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand, with the tobacco industry," family practitioner Alan Blum told a group at the Texas Medical Center Library this week. "The AMA allowed the industry to get away with murder."

Blum's talk on the subject came as "The Unfiltered Truth About Smoking and Health," a small historical exhibit containing stacks of documents he said illustrates the connections, went on display at the library.

At the heart of Blum's claims are numerous documents taken from 150,000 pages of internal tobacco industry correspondence and reports. The documents were produced by tobacco manufacturers in the 1980s during a major lawsuit.

One item, dated February 1964, shows that about the time the U.S. surgeon general issued a famous report on the dangers of tobacco, the AMA began a five-year contract worth \$10 million with six tobacco manufacturers.

The research was to check the effects of nicotine and other tobacco substances, aiming to identify and remove potentially disease-causing ele-

ments of smoke.

Also in February 1968, another document shows, the AMA informed the Federal Trade Commission in a letter that "cautionary labeling cannot be anticipated to serve the public interest with any particular degree of success." Everyone already knew cigarettes were dangerous, the AMA reasoned, so why bother putting warnings on packages.

An associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine, Blum is a foremost proponent of a 71-chapter national organization known as DOC, meaning Doctors Ought to Care.

Blum has given 1,500 lectures on the dangers of smoking and its history in the United States. He pleaded with government agencies to not allow cigarette advertising at sports events and has been a dauntless anti-smoking agitator.

At the AMA's headquarters in Chicago, the organization's tobacco-control expert, Dr. Thomas Houston, questioned why Blum is regaling the AMA with documents that are "a generation old."

"The AMA of 30 years ago is very different than what exists today," Houston said.

The 1960s-era documents cited by Blum are from a time when celebrities smoked cigarettes on national television and AMA leaders had a different mindset, Houston said.

He quoted a 1995 editorial in the AMA Journal, which he said was signed by the AMA board of trustees: "The AMA reminds physicians, the public and the politicians that the damning evidence against tobacco makes opposition to its use a pressing, nonpartisan public health issue."

Eric Solberg, executive director of the Houston chapter of DOC said his group hopes to open a museum here to illustrate the history of tobacco use in the United States.



Blum