

DOC Uses Counter Advertising For Prevention

"We're the Good Health People"

At a time when the "health care industry" is responding to daily charges of causing the high cost of medical care, a young Miami physician is leading a grassroots effort to "place the blame squarely where it belongs — on the industries which promote bad health."

During his "Superhealth '79" program, Dr. Alan Blum told some 600 public health workers attending the Mississippi Public Health Association convention in Jackson that the number one preventable cause of illness (and high medical costs) is cigarette smoking. He maintained that the traditional approach to patient education about the dangers of smoking has simply not worked. The reason, he said, is the enormous success of cigarette advertising.

Does it pay to advertise? Dr. Blum points out that more women and youth are smoking now than ever before, and he notes the discrepancy in budgets for cigarette advertising (\$2 million per day by the tobacco industry) and smoking awareness programs (\$1 million per year by the federal government). He maintains that the tobacco industry has "sold" us an epidemic of costly, devastating diseases. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," declares the cigarette ad directed to women smokers. Yes, agrees Dr. Blum, women have come a long way — to a 500% increase in lung cancer during the last 30 years and a heart attack rate which approaches that of men.

Medical science itself has even been used to promote smoking, he said, recalling the advertisements some years ago which proclaimed, "More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette," "Many Leading Nose and Throat Specialists Suggest Change to Philip Morris," and "L & M, Just What the Doctor Ordered." Today's advertisements appeal to the desire for physical attractiveness and

social success.

It was the realization that the nation's young people were "getting the message" of the bad health promoters rather than the message of preventive medicine that prompted Dr. Blum and several other resident physicians to form in 1977 a non-profit organization called DOC, an acronym for "Doctors Ought to Care." He and his associate, Dr. Rick Richards of Georgia, explained the "ought" is not intended to imply that physicians don't care but rather to emphasize that they are the ones who do care.

The DOC organization, which now numbers more than 500 health professionals across the country, has declared war on the devastating effects of smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and poor nutrition. Their weapons are clever, selectively purchased counter-advertisements directed toward a group which has been most receptive to (and a prime target of) advertising — adolescents. DOC also uses posters, promotional T-shirts, speakers bureaus, radio shows and newspaper columns to deliver the preventive medicine message. Their tactics are humor, good sense and genuine concern (ads are signed, "With Love, DOC"). Their aim is to stop bad health habits before they start.

If DOC is successful, Dr. Blum said in an interview with JOURNAL MSMA, the result will be a whole new generation of healthy young people who will make intelligent, informed, independent decisions about the killer habits, rather than succumb to the insidious message of advertising. The impact on the cost of medical care will be enormous, and the declining image of physicians will be enhanced, as well. "We're not just anti-smoking," he said, "we're anti-emphysema, anti-lung cancer and anti-heart disease."

"We should use the same ingenuity to promote good health as they have used to sell bad health," he concluded, in response to a comment on DOC's imaginative approach.