

BRIEFINGS

by GLORIA COOPER

Burning issue

The World Cigarette Pandemic, edited by Alan Blum, M.D. *New York State Journal of Medicine*, December 1983

There are enough story ideas here to choke a camel — and maybe the entire tobacco industry as well. Underlying all of them, and a story in itself, are questions involving the coverage of smoking and health by the mainstream press, and the degree to which the \$1.5 billion spent annually on cigarette advertising is blowing smoke in the media's greedy eyes. If the subject seems stale, think again: it is reignited in the pages of this medical journal with a fresh urgency that is not easily waved away.

In assembling his 157-page package, physician-editor Alan Blum has left no leaf unturned. Fifty-odd articles, by experts from the U.S. and abroad, examine the tobacco problem in the most concrete of clinical, political, economic, legal, and ethical terms, while dozens of samples drawn from five decades of cigarette advertising trace the marketing history of the weed from early claims of medical endorsement to current pitches to women, children, and the third world.

The media-tobacco syndrome is far from simple. Contrast, for example, the field reports on the status of clean-indoor-air legislation in such states as Minnesota, where, according to a public-opinion survey by the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the act in force there since 1975 retains its political popularity, with the experience in Florida, where a Dade County referendum calling for such legislation was narrowly defeated in 1979, thanks to a \$1 million advertising campaign by the tobacco industry and ridicule from *The Miami Herald* and *The Miami News*. Compare, if you will, the policies of seven other countries around the world, ranging from Norway, where all cigarette advertising and promotion of tobacco products has been banned since 1973, with appreciable positive results (and where, contrary to the predictions of the tobacco lobby, the newspapers did not fold), to the situation in Malaysia, where cigarettes can be advertised in over fifty papers in eight different languages, where consumption is rising — and where the annual Malaysian press awards are spon-



sored by the Malaysian Tobacco Company. Consider, too, the fascinating exchange of letters between a New York vascular surgeon and *The New York Times*, in which the doctor's repeated challenges to the paper's policy of accepting cigarette advertising, and his pleas that it open its pages to a discussion of the issue, finds him on an epistolary treadmill to silence and stonewalls. The replies — and the non-replies — of the paper's manager of advertising acceptability, vice president, publisher, editorial page editors, and manager of advertising acceptability (again) have an eloquence all their own.

Symptoms of the media's weakness are not hard to spot. Here are the television networks, unstained by tobacco commercials since 1965 yet still lighting up the screen with priceless exposure of tobacco-sponsored sports events — events, incidentally, that also get plugged in newspaper ads for department stores like Gimbels and Saks Fifth Avenue, which happen to be owned by BAT Industries, formerly British American Tobacco. (Financial details on the six major American tobacco companies and their interlocks with other sources of lucrative advertising, such as distillers, theaters, hotels, and pharmaceutical companies, make instructive reading.) Here is PBS's documentary *The Chemical People*, a much-touted look at adolescent drug abuse that contains not a single mention of smoking or of advertising for alcohol or cigarettes — despite a report from the National Institute on Drug Abuse indicting cigarette smoking as the nation's leading form of drug dependence. Here is *The New York Times*, dutifully reporting in a wire story on page D18 the surgeon general's statement that 170,000 Americans

will die in 1983 of smoking-related heart disease, while covering congressional hearings on formaldehyde in the paper's front section — and here is the *Times*, together with *Time*, taking out ads in *The United States Tobacco Journal* thanking the cigarette companies for their advertising business. Here are the mass circulation women's magazines, including the liberated *Ms.*, sidestepping their responsibility to their increasing numbers of smoking readers, while tobacco ads project images of women that are designed to get high ratings from feminists. (Media buyers may be especially interested in the article "A Positive Health Strategy for the Office Waiting Room" in which a Georgia physician urges his 400,000 American colleagues to cancel their subscriptions to magazines that carry tobacco advertising — or, at the very least, to follow the practice of those physicians who scrawl antismoking messages across the ads in their waiting-room magazines. A sidebar lists the growing number of magazines that refuse such ads.)

Plenty of other prescriptions are offered here — to the medical community, to consumer groups, to legislators, to the media — all of which seem to make uncommon good sense. As one British clinician puts it to his colleagues in research, "To be silent during a public health tragedy is not honest medicine." Readers of this stunning issue will know that it isn't honest journalism, either.

Risky business

Editors and Stress, by Robert H. Giles. Associated Press Managing Editors Association, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10020. 1983.

These are the times that try editors' souls — and their bodies, it seems, as well. Circulation is down; blood pressure is up. Advertising pressure mounts; sex drive drops. The newshole diminishes; the chest pains do not. Still, they like the work — even boast of the toughness it demands. And somehow, in the high-powered, high-tension, high-anxiety jungle of the daily news, they manage to adapt and survive.