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Media seen as allies of tobacco industry

By Dr David Nowlan,
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THE MASS media and the pharmaceutical industry were allies of the tobacco industry, a leading American anti-smoking campaigner said yesterday in Dublin.

Addressing the 12th World Conference on Health Education, which has drawn 850 delegates to Trinity College from around the world, Dr Alan Blum said that it was absurd and obscene for newspapers to write and campaign about minor cancer-causing substances such as asbestos when they continued to help sell the biggest cancer-causer of all — cigarettes.

He did not exempt the Irish media from his criticism, holding up examples of cigarettes advertising from Irish newspapers he had acquired since his arrival in Dublin. He accused the pharmaceutical industry worldwide of collaborating with the tobacco manufacturers to perpetuate the unhealthy status quo. One of the largest cigarette companies in the US, he said was a subsidiary of a drug company.

Much of his presentation to the conference was a scathing attack on the advertising and promotion techniques used by both the drink and tobacco industries. He showed examples of alcohol advertising from the US clearly aimed at children (including one which suggested that Bailey's Irish Cream was a great gift for Mother's Day: "Who gives his mother a bottle of booze?" asked Dr Blum).

He said that cigarette manufacturers had decided to stop advertising on American television only after a court ruling which insisted that TV stations were obliged to give equal time for anti-cigarette advertising. They claimed to have done this in the public interest. In fact they did it, he said, because during a six-year period of counter-advertising, tobacco consumption actually declined for the first time, when it had been expected to increase by 30 per cent.

Dr Blum, editor of the *New York State Journal of Medicine*, is

a founder of DOC (Doctors Ought to Care), an organisation which now has 20 chapters in the US and which devises specifically anti-cigarette advertising campaigns. Its aim is to destroy the images created by the tobacco companies. When a cigarette manufacturer launched a campaign based on a macho image of a man who said: "I smoke for Taste", DOC produced a series of advertisements with an even more macho man, a cigarette hanging from one nostril, saying: "I smoke for Smell".

He was also critical of Governments which allowed the promotion of cigarettes with differing tar levels, as if lower levels were safer. Smoking a high tar level was like jumping from the 50th floor, a middle tar like jumping

from the 40th floor and a low tar from the 30th floor, he said.

Among the papers from Ireland which were critical of the tobacco industry and the way in which it was accepted as part of the legitimate fabric of society, Dr Joseph Robins, assistant secretary of the Department of Health, said that, under EEC laws, tobacco had the same legal status as any other commercial product. It was not seen in the same light as, say, a harmful narcotic drug would be seen.

He called on conference delegates who were in a position to influence their Governments to support a move by the Minister for Health, Mr Desmond, to get the EEC to formulate anti-tobacco measures at a meeting of the Community's Ministers for Health early next year.