

# TOBACCO AND YOUTH REPORTER

VOLUME I, NUMBER I

SUMMER, 1986



*It is nothing short of a national tragedy that so much death and disease are wrought by a powerful habit so often taken up by unsuspecting children, lured by seductive multimillion dollar cigarette advertising campaigns.*

*U.S. Surgeon General, 1979*

## A NATIONAL CONCERN

In May, 1984, I set the objective of a smoke-free society by the year 2000. At that time, national concern with tobacco experimentation and consumption was sufficient to warrant a goal of reduction. Although the incidence of smoking has decreased significantly, the youth of yesterday continue to be the smokers of today.

If we are to achieve our objective of a smoke-free society by the year 2000, we must intensify educational and preventive efforts. These efforts, directed toward the youth of this country, must be marked with the same energy and commitment which has characterized successful public health initiatives to protect our youth against other health hazards, such as childhood vaccine-preventable diseases, including polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and measles, mumps, and rubella.

As we work together to reduce the problem of smoking in the United States, we will also reduce the morbidity, long-term disability, and death resulting from tobacco use. I believe the most effective way to decrease national tobacco consumption is prevention, coupled with public health education. This should lead to youth who understand the dangers of smoking and, therefore, avoid starting, as well as to regular users of tobacco who make the effort necessary to break the smoking habit.

C. Everett Koop, M.D.  
Surgeon General

## TOBACCO ADVERTISING IN THE U.S.: AMERICA EATS ITS YOUNG

Alan Blum, M.D.

*Dr. Blum founded DOC (Doctors Ought to Care -- see article by John W. Richards, M.D. elsewhere in this issue) in 1977. He was editor of the Medical Journal of Western Australia and the New York State Journal of Medicine. In the latter post, he was responsible for two landmark issues dedicated to the World Cigarette Pandemic. He wrote his first article on smoking in 1964 as editor of a high school paper.*

*When you're a jet, you're a jet all the way,  
From your first cigarette to your last dying day...  
West Side Story*

The picture of a cigarette-smoking street gang member is not quite an anachronism in the 1980s, but compared with the range of hard drugs available to teenagers today, cigarettes seem like little more than leftover forbidden fruit of the halcyon '50s. Hardly a day goes by without a news report about cocaine, crack, or quaaludes. Professional athletes and the first lady visit schools to denounce drug abuse; politicians rail against dope dealers on school grounds; and parents groups mobilize to form federations for "drug-free-youth" and "just say no" clubs.

The seriousness of illicit drug abuse among young people cannot be denied. But although the media and public officials alike are fearless in their zeal to denounce teenage drug abuse, they have been conspicuously silent about what the National Institute on Drug Abuse has called -- for nearly a decade -- our number one form of drug dependence: cigarette smoking.

They may think that teenage tobacco use is a disappearing problem. The impression is widespread that people are quitting smoking in droves, and the number of teenagers taking up cigarette smoking is going down. Cigarette advertising no longer appears on television.



Cigarette companies are diversifying so rapidly, it is said, because they "see the hand-writing on the wall." Besides, many people think the filtered cigarettes of today are relatively safe.

These impressions are largely wrong. In fact, the problem may be worse than ever before. Although the total number of adult male smokers is less than it was in 1964, black, Hispanic, and native American teenage boys have increased their smoking. Per capita consumption of cigarettes has declined only slightly, and total sales are undiminished. Even the government's own figures show that there are eight times as many girls aged 12-to-14 who are smoking today as in 1971 -- the year in which cigarette commercials last appeared on television and radio; today more females aged 17-to-18 are smoking than males. Joe Tye estimates that 1985 tobacco sales to children were about \$2 billion (only the industry knows for sure), and that when smokeless tobacco is taken into account, tobacco use by children may now be at an all-time high.

There have been scattered efforts to develop curricular materials concerning the dangers of smoking for grade schools, but no organization is sponsoring paid advertising to counter the nearly \$3 billion spent annually to encourage tobacco use. As this issue of the *Tobacco and Youth Reporter* illustrates, it is these promotional campaigns that are largely responsible for children smoking in spite of our best efforts to teach them about the health hazards.

### SEEKING SOLUTIONS

A campaign to end the holocaust of cigarette-induced disease should aim at its origin, the cigarette industry. Unfortunately, many well-intentioned but ineffective campaigns of the government and health charities have fallen into the trap of laying the onus on the user instead of the pusher. Because teenagers are far more brand conscious than adults (most kids smoke Marlboro; only adults, for whom image is less important, smoke generic cigarettes), ridiculing the brand-name imagery of the most popular brands will undermine cigarette company efforts to increase sales to children far more effectively than generic "anti-smoking" poster contests. Children are taught from the age of two that smoking is dangerous to their health, but they haven't heard nearly often enough that the Marlboro man is a jerk, a bore, and a loser.

All too many efforts to reduce youth smoking perpetuate the myth that smoking is caused by peer pressure. This notion would be rudely dispelled by a visit to the conference rooms of advertising agencies seeking more effective ways to reach the youth market. More money is spent advertising and promoting cigarettes than any other product in this country. In this age of mass media, peer pressure is bought -- signed, sealed, and delivered -- on Madison Avenue. The creative director of an advertising agency told me:

*When I worked for a well-known New York advertising agency, we were trying very hard to influence kids who were 14 years old to smoke. I was laughing on the outside and crying on the inside. My experience tells me never to believe any noble notions about advertising men -- that they don't aim at kids. They will aim at whatever the client and they have determined will sell the product. They do not care what the product is.*

One is tempted to suggest that the leading health educator in America -- by virtue of its positive, exciting appeal to young consumers -- is the cigarette industry. The companies outdo one another to claim they are "lowest in tar" (translation: low poison) on the pages of newspaper sports sections. Every one of the thousands of unopposed billboards and other advertisements a child grows up seeing represents the cigarette companies' denial of facts discovered by medical science. By virtue of its ubiquitous presence and powerful psychological manipulation, advertising can make the cigarette a symbol for anything the tobacco industry wants it to be.

The Tobacco and Youth Reporter can serve as a valuable tool in reducing the problem of tobacco dependence among young people. It can contribute to the essential task of exposing the insidious promotional activities that so effectively influence children to use tobacco, and to raise public awareness of the need to counteract this loathsome industry and its allies.