

Tobacco, alcohol major health threats, physician tells group

By Stephanie Neal

Staff Writer

Cocaine, marijuana and even Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome are not the major health hazards in most communities - tobacco and alcohol are, according to a nationally noted pro-health activist who visited Augusta Thursday.

Dr. Alan Blum, a family practice physician and a professor at the Baylor College of Medicine in Waco, Texas, said tobacco and alcohol abuse can lead to the abuse of other substances.

"But they also stay with the abuser," he said.

About 11 percent of all high school students use marijuana on a daily basis, with about half of those dropping the habit later. But most of the 20 to 30 percent of all high school students who smoke cigarettes daily probably will maintain that habit, Dr. Blum said.

Dr. Blum was in Augusta on Thursday to speak at the Academy of Richmond County as an activity of Drug Awareness Week, an event sponsored by the Augusta Regional Coalition for Alcohol and Drug Education.

The media is at fault for sending confused signals about substance abuse, he said.

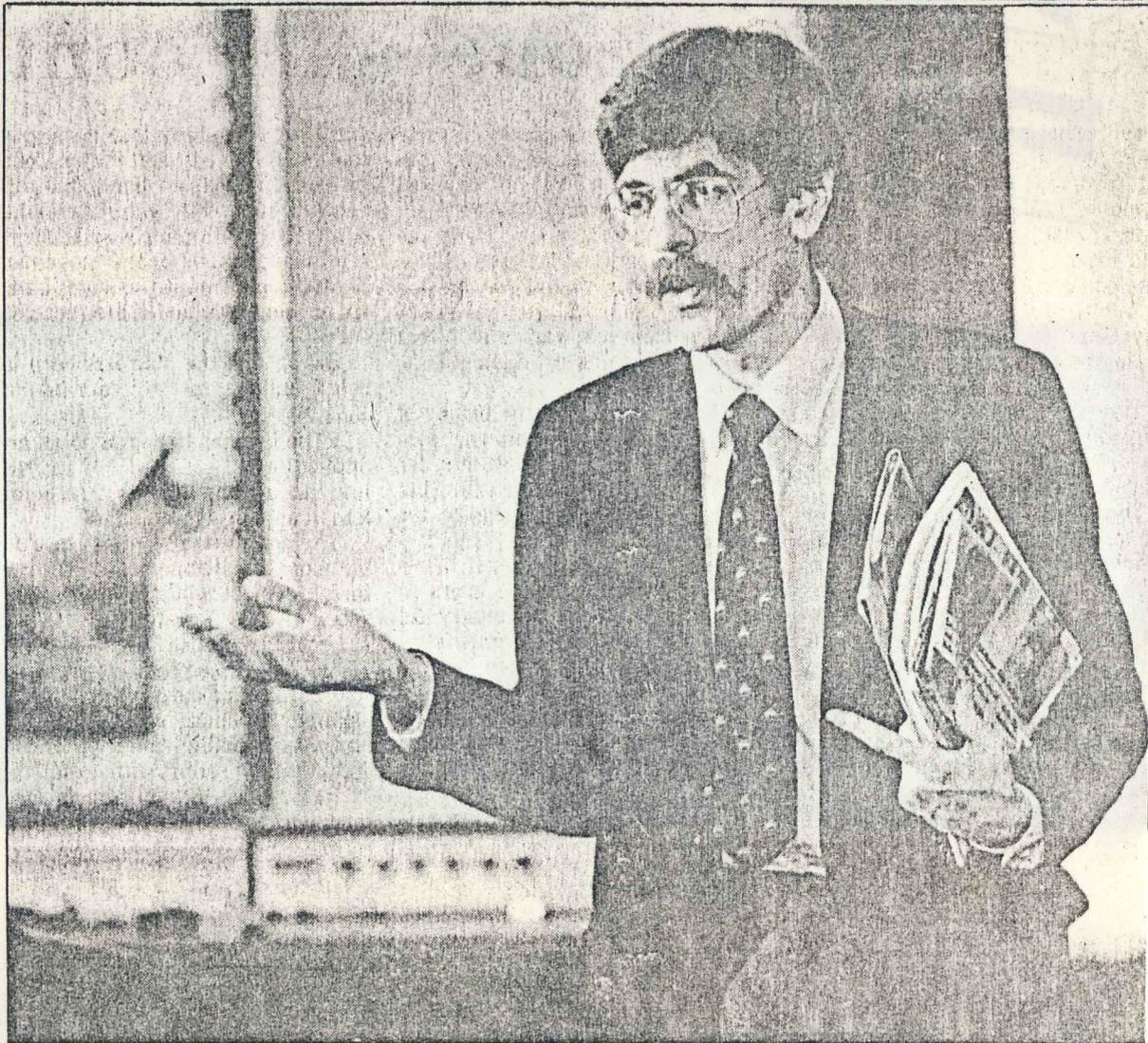
Entertainment and advertising in all media glamorize smoking and drinking, while news stories and public service announcements advise people to say no to drugs, he said.

A more effective method of educating youth - and also adults - about substance abuse would be to implement a counter-advertising campaign satirizing alcohol and tobacco company advertising, Dr. Blum said.

For example, Doctors Ought to Care, a national physicians' organization founded by Dr. Blum, sponsors an Emphysema Slims Celebrity Pro Tennis Tournament, satirizing the tobacco company-supported Virginia Slims Tennis Tournament.

"And change the vocabulary," he said. "Let's call them (alcohol and tobacco companies) drug pushers."

Dr. Blum also suggested that communities should pursue clean indoor air measures and improved school-based abuse awareness programs to combat the "big lies" of the advertising campaigns.



Staff photo by Jeff Barnes

Dr. Alan Blum discusses substance abuse in visit to Academy of Richmond County