

Tobacco firms help *and* hurt black community

THERE IS AN old fable that says something about a lamb following a wolf in sheep's clothing. Today, that seems to be what tobacco and alcohol companies are trying to get black people to do when they aim their killer products specifically at blacks.

Last year, Dr. Alan Blum of the Family Practice Center at Baylor College of Medicine told me that he was "extremely concerned about the targeting of minority communities by the tobacco and alcohol industries." He had been looking into the subject for nearly a decade, and was disturbed that the situation was worsening.

And worsening it is.

Just the other day, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco revealed plans to test market a cigarette brand with a promotional blitz aimed primarily at blacks in slick ads suggesting glamour, high fashion and night life.

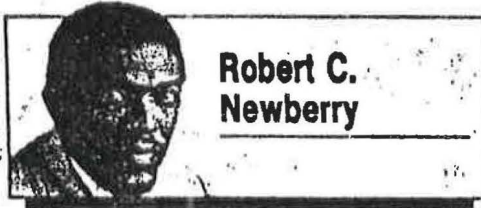
The campaign for Uptown cigarettes is scheduled to begin Feb. 5 in Philadelphia.

But luckily, it is already under fire from anti-smoking forces and some blacks.

"Any time you target something to a definite image you ... are stereotyping," said Mary Clarke, president of the NAACP branch in Charlotte. "I say it's unethical when it targets the black population."

(Actually, just about all advertising is targeted, so blacks are not alone in this).

Dr. Blum says his organization, Doctors



Robert C. Newberry

Ought to Care, is planning to launch a counter campaign called Upchuck.

Joanne Schellenbach, a spokeswoman for the American Cancer Society, said the company, based in Winston-Salem, is using blacks as "guinea pigs for something that will kill them in huge proportions."

She continued: "If you are a black person walking around the neighborhoods being bombarded by those kind of messages, it's hard not to be affected by them."

Reynolds says that kind of thinking is paternalistic and that blacks — just as women and white men — have a right to a brand that suits their taste preferences.

That is certainly true. Although it is becoming less fashionable and more difficult to find a place to smoke nowadays, people do have a right to kill themselves with legal substances.

Reynolds is hoping the new menthol brand will carve out a niche in the cigarette

market, which overall is shrinking and becoming more segmented.

The campaign will feature people enjoying urban night life in an ad that will read "Uptown. The Place. The Taste."

"We expect Uptown to appeal strongly to black smokers," said Lynn Beasley, Reynolds vice president of strategic marketing. "Black smokers show a strong preference for menthol brands."

Indeed, Seventy-five percent of all black smokers prefer menthol brands, according to the U.S. Office on Smoking and Health in Washington, D.C.

Among black smokers, Newport, made by Lorillard Inc., is the most popular. Brown & Williamson Tobacco's Kool brand and Reynolds' Salem are second and third.

About 7 million blacks smoke cigarettes, representing about 34 percent of the nation's black population and about 13 percent of all American smokers, according to Simmons Market Research Bureau.

The percentage of Americans who smoke dropped from 40 percent to 30 percent since 1964, falling most dramatically among college-educated consumers, according to the U.S. surgeon general's office. The number of black smokers has decreased as well, but not as much.

And according to U.S. Public Health Service figures, black men have a 58 per-

cent higher incidence of lung cancer than white men, and blacks lose twice as many years of life as do whites because of smoking-related diseases.

Dr. Blum: "The tobacco industry says more minorities are blue collar workers and that they are exposed to more occupational hazards. But the fact is, regardless of their occupations, more blacks are smoking and getting lung cancer. To try to explain this away is the height of cynicism."

To be sure, the tobacco and alcohol companies are major supporters of black concerns. They do put a lot of the money they earn off blacks back into the black community. I have to give them that. They advertise in black newspapers and magazines, they underwrite black galas and extravaganzas, and they make donations to vital black organizations. That's certainly more than other industries do.

But at what cost do black people enjoy these companies' generous gifts. It's costing black lives. So many lives, in fact, that the American Cancer Society once published a pamphlet called *Smoking and Genocide*, then reconsidered and changed the title to something less provocative.

It is up to black people to decide on our own whether we want to continue on this course with the alcohol and tobacco companies. No one else can — or should — make this life or death decision for us.