

## Fiery doctor wants smoke out of sports

By LEIGH HOPPER  
OF THE HOUSTON POST STAFF

**R**IDICULE IS THE best revenge. Houston's Dr. Alan Blum gets his yuks by calling Cutty Sark "Cutty Sank," or Marlboro "Barfboro." The family physician delights in a bumper sticker, a takeoff on Dakota brand cigarettes, that reads "Dakota DaCough DaCancer DaCoffin." He's behind the "Emphysema Slims of Houston" tennis tournament today and Sunday at Memorial Park Tennis Center, poking fun at the city's April 13-19 Virginia Slims tournament sponsored by tobacco giant Philip Morris Cos. Inc.

Under the jokes is a vociferous critic of tobacco and alcohol advertising whose 15-year crusade has led to an international organization boasting thousands of members. Some might call him a fanatic — a spokeswoman for Philip Morris, which puts on the Virginia Slims tour, says, "We believe Dr. Blum's views are misguided . . . the young women who play are never asked to smoke." His admirers — who include former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop — find him an inspiration and compare him to the character Robin Williams played in *Dead Poets Society*.

Koop calls Blum "a refreshing breeze on the whole anti-smoking campaign . . . He is a medical doctor who is very knowledgeable about the health issues of smoking. He is forthright, very clever and he is a thorn in the side of the tobacco industry and that pleases me."

Blum, 43, is the founder of Houston-based Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), an organization of doctors and medical students dedicated to "laughing the pushers out of town." With 400,000 tobacco-related deaths and 150,000 alcohol-related deaths each year, Blum sees DOC's activities as "preventative medicine."

On a recent visit to the hectic DOC headquarters at Baylor Family Practice, Blum is clearly in his element. The Virginia Slims is not far away and the Emphysema tournament is beginning. The Emphysema Slims poster says, "You've coughed up long enough baby! Kick the tobacco companies out of sports." DOC organizers expect the third annual

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Jerry Click/The Houston Post  
"Emphysema Slims of Houston" pokes fun at the Virginia Slims tennis tournament, says Dr. Alan Blum.

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Houston tournament to draw 150 players. Just like a "serious" tournament, the Emphysema Slims has sponsors like Momentum BMW, HUB Buick, Dr Pepper, Randall's, Oshman's and GTE Mobilnet. "We're getting in the sports promotion angle," Blum says. The Emphysema Slims tour plays in five of the cities on the Virginia Slims tour and ends in Santa Fe, N.M., in the fall with a \$100,000 championship event.

"We're (DOC) a kind of miniature guerilla movement," Blum explains. With enough funding, "we really could threaten a lot of major (cigarette) brands."

DOC, which Blum founded in 1977, now has more than 150 chapters in 27 countries. Over 7,000 doctors donate money to the cause, and the DOC newsletters go out to 14,000.

Blum was a resident in family medicine when he started DOC, but his interest in cigarette advertising goes back to his high school days in New York. His father, a family physician, gave Blum a copy of a landmark study on the dangers of smoking, and Blum wrote an article about it for his high school paper.

In 1978, he gave a workshop at the National Conference of Family Practice and won some followers who went home and started their own DOC chapters. In fact, most groups were started by people who have heard Blum speak. For example, DOC executive director Eric Solberg, inspired by Blum, began using his own vacation time (before he came to work for DOC) to speak to students. DOC's activities are far-reaching, ranging from paid counter-ads in publications and billboards to paper "barf bags" printed with "Barfboro — Does cigarette advertising make you sick? Us too! Love, DOC" and little stickers that can be placed on magazines in libraries and airports.

The stickers say things like: "Many of the ads in this publication are misleading, deceptive and a ripoff. For example, smoking doesn't make one glamorous, macho, successful or athletic. It does make one sick, poor and dead. We care about you and your health. Love, DOC."

Subtle, Blum's not. In 1990, he raised a ruckus when he protested Miller Beer's sizable donations to the Texas Special Olympics — especially because alcohol abuse leads to fetal alcohol syndrome, a leading cause of mental retardation.

That same year DOC irked Miller officials by selling T-shirts at Miller Lite's "Biggest Party in History" that said "Killer Lite Beer" and "We're Pushing a Drug." Miller filed suit against Blum and DOC. The American Civil Liberties Union immediately saw freedom of speech implications, and rallied to Blum's aid. Miller ended up dropping the suit.

Blum, an assistant professor at Baylor College of Medicine who sees patients at Baylor Family Practice, is a sought-after speaker and respected medical editor who can entertain an auditorium full of junior high students, or inform a roomful of physicians. He's out at least twice a month doing high school assemblies to a couple thousand kids. This week he was giving five lectures at the Eighth World Conference on Smoking and Health in Argentina.

"My objective is to get people to think differently about (smoking)," he says. "Our best audience

is the blue-collar worker who smokes. They're fascinated to learn that low tar just means low poison. Or that the filter doesn't do any good, it's just a fraud. Or that menthol is an anesthetic agent."

Blum subscribes to seven newspapers, medical journals, advertising journals, tobacco industry journals, and periodicals devoted to auto racing (a sport that is full of cigarette advertising). He is married, has three children, doesn't smoke and enjoys an occasional beer.

He's also gaining a reputation as an artist. Blum sketches his patients ("Everyone's face is nice to look at," he says) and scribbles down the poetic, unusual or funny things they say. (He asked an elderly patient, "How's your teeth?" She replied, "Oh, my dentist died.") An exhibit of his drawings was recently shown at the University of Texas Medical School.

While he was editor of the New York State Journal of Medicine in the mid-'80s, he produced two issues devoted to "The World Cigarette Pandemic" — which are still requested, even though extra copies are long gone. He also edited "The Cigarette Underworld," a look at the history of cigarette advertising.

Dr. Pascal Imperato, editor of the New York State Journal of Medicine, says, "The journal really made a major turnaround during the time of his tenure . . . He's in the trenches of preventative medicine . . . sometimes that's not popular. People who take courageous stands are not always popular with everyone."

In its early years, DOC was more of a "fringe" organization than it is today. Now, to Blum's satisfaction, anti-smoking sentiment is almost mainstream.

The DOC "archives," where Blum and his assistants hatch new plans of attack until 1 or 2 a.m., are crammed with cigarette and booze promotional items, such as a vintage poster that says "Camels Agree with My Throat," the latest Marlboro promotional T-shirt, or posters of women holding beer mugs.

"He's a genius at tobacco activism," says Dr. Joel Dunnington, a diagnostic radiologist and DOC national treasurer. "He still comes out with things I've never thought about . . . a different angle to fight, a different angle to make fun of."

Blum's dream is to see all alcohol and tobacco advertising banned. "I'd love to destroy the tobacco industry," he says. In the meantime, DOC has had its share of victories, big and small. For example, in Aspen, Colo., kids used to pay 50 cents to participate in the "Marlboro Ski Challenge," which consisted of skiing through a course of Marlboro signs. DOC ridiculed the event so much that Aspen decided to drop it, even though it brought the city thousands of dollars in revenue.

In a more general sense, Blum's activist attitude toward preventative medicine has filtered down into medical school curriculums, says DOC's Solberg. Medical students take required and elective classes that encourage them to take their vision into the community through paid ads, school assemblies and fun events.

"The main focus of my career is tobacco and alcohol advertising and what it's doing to the next generation," Blum says. "We are not just raising money for research, we're raising money for action."